Up For Hire (You Found Me) by eddieklives

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Genre: Age Difference, Alternate Universe - No Pennywise (IT), Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Explicit Sexual Content, Happy Ending, Implied/Referenced Drug Use, M/M, Period-Typical Homophobia, Pretty Woman AU, Set in the 90s, Slow Burn, please read the notes at the beginning of chapters, tw/cw will be added
Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Connor Bowers, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Myra Kaspbrak is Not a Kaspbrak - Character, Original Characters, Patricia Blum Uris, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris, it's Myra Rutherfurd
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Summary:

Edward Kaspbrak is a successful and powerful man. Richie Tozier is a sex worker who offered to give him directions to his hotel (for a price).

AKA: The Pretty Woman AU no one asked for. (You don't need to have seen the movie to read.)

-- Project for NaNoWriMo 2020 --

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier
Comments: 32

Kudos: 95

Chapter 1

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hello!
>
> For this chapter I would like to leave a warning about the sex scene. Richie, after many years in the business, dissociates, or "shuts off" as he puts it, to better cope with having multiple encounters with strangers. It's his coping mechanism, for his own sanity. The sex is consensual, but he's not present during it. The last thing I want is to trigger anyone so, I will always leave the warnings here. Make sure to always read the notes.
>
> There are mentions of drug use (cocaine) on Bill and Connor's parts. Richie and Edward are clean for the whole fic.
>
> I hope you enjoy and leave a comment letting me know! :D

Richie rolled on his side and grabbed the pillow, pressing his face harder against it. With another satisfied costumer and 350 dollars in the pocket of his leather pants, he was thankful this one was letting him nap for a bit, instead of quickly rushing him out of the motel room. He could always tell the married ones from the single ones, and the closeted and homophobic ones from the openly gay ones since the former would occasionally end their encounter by calling him a “disgusting fag”. The current one, Richie was confident, was married, but he knew he was gay.

He’d been doing this since he was 17 and well…it beat the hell out of waitering. It could be made a lot easier if it weren’t for Henry constantly being on his ass about his cut. Richie had been trying for a while to get them both out of Henry’s territory, but Bill was a magnet for trouble with every pimp on Sunset Boulevard, running off with any guy that could get him a few lines for cheap.

He felt emotionally and physically exhausted, as he did after every BDSM job. He didn't particularly enjoy being dominant, but work was work, and he would do whatever his clients needed from him, even if it left him feeling completely void for the next 8 to 10 hours. Watching the man laying beside him, he felt slightly proud of his hard work. Those bruises were gonna last, which made him wonder if his wife knew about his exploits with men, or sex workers at all.

The man, Richie decided he'd call him Dan, had taken off his wedding ring and placed it in his jeans' pocket, before removing them and throwing them on a nearby chair. He didn't realize that Richie had been looking, but Richie always saw everything. It wasn't the first time a client would remove his wedding band before they started, it probably wouldn't be the last. Richie didn't really understand why they did that, he didn't understand how it was supposed to help them perform. Did they directly associate their marriage to a ring? Did they feel like they weren't cheating if they didn't have it on?

Dan rolled around with a wince and startled Richie slightly. He really did a number on him.

"I should go." He hummed.

Richie smiled softly and rolled over to watch him get up and struggle to put his shirt back on.

"Can I- see you, again?" He asked, tall and broad and charming.

"You know where to find me. Same sidewalk as always."

"What's your real name?" He asked, a wide smile appearing.

"Richard." He said. "Well, Richie." He corrected.

"Michael. Mike." He zipped up his pants.

"I was calling you Dan, in my head."

Mike let out a loud laugh. "Do I look like a Dan?"

"Mike suits you better." Richie began getting dressed as well.

Mike took two steps in his direction and caressed his jaw, smiling. “I’ll see you again sometime, then, Richie.” Then, he picked up his things and walked out of the motel room.

“For sure.” Was all Richie said, before the door shut.

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"Edward, darling, are you ready to leave?" Myra called from the living room. "The driver is here." She completed, looking exasperated, as he walked towards her, cuffing his cufflinks. Myra smelled expensive; her blonde hair carefully styled into the perfect bob cut.

"George." He greeted with a small head nod, as usual. Polite, but no fuss.

"The suitcases are already in the vehicle, Mr. Kaspbrak."

"Excellent, thank you."

"You will be late." Myra warned.

"I think that is impossible, considering it's a private plane and it doesn't leave unless I'm in it, sweetheart."

"You know I don't like it when you rush! It raises your blood pressure and strains your heart. What if you have a heart attack?" She straightened his tie, tightening the knot as well.

"I'm 41 and in shape, Myra. I won't have a heart attack."

Before she could insist on his blood pressure one more time, he kissed her chastely on the cheek and said goodbye, quickly followed by George. They entered the elevator and, immediately, Edward loosened the knot on his tie and wiped the sweat off his forehead. At first, he thought George hadn't noticed, but then the young boy handed him a small handkerchief.

"Sir." He offered with a nod.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you, George." He blotted away at his forehead.

As the elevator sounded off, indicating that they had reached the first floor, Edward retightened the knot around his throat and stepped out with an exhale, preparing himself for the New York breeze and smell that was about to hit him a few feet ahead, the same as every morning.

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Richie walked into a mess of scattered clothes and broken glass at the apartment, and Bill in his bed, still visibly working through the last few lines of cocaine from the night before. Every time he found Bill like that, fucked out of his mind on whatever mix Henry got him from one of his goons, he thanked whatever deity was up there for quitting drugs when he was still a teenager, and managing to stay clean for the past 13 years as a sex worker, being offered any and every kind of drug on the market.

He had wrongly assumed that the more money inclined Johns would be the least tolerant towards drugs and he hoped that his sobriety would land him some better paying gigs- oh, to be a young country boy in Los Angeles and believe such a thing. The richer the client, the fancier the drug.

Richie picked up Bill effortlessly and carried him to the bathroom, laughing as he imagined what Bill's 5'7" ass would do if the roles were reversed and he had to carry Richie's 6'2" body around their efficiency apartment, on a cocaine stupor, no less. He shoved Bill in the rusty bathtub and turned on the cold water, watching his friend awake in lazy screams and whines.

"Rich-"

Richie interrupted him by aiming the shower head right at his face, the water pressure knocking his head back immediately, it having no

strength to support itself in the state he was in.

He turned the tap and slapped Bill's thigh with the shower head. "Was the coke free or am I paying your rent this month, again?"

Bill didn't respond in words; instead, he chose to roll over in the bathtub and wrap his arms around himself, in pained and shaky moans, soaking wet. Richie shook his head, first with disapproval and disbelief, but then, all too quickly, with sadness and an instinctual need to help his friend. He walked out of the miniscule bathroom and grabbed some of Bill's clean(ish) clothes, along with one of their thicker blankets, which they didn't have many of around, considering it was LA and they almost never spent a night in their own apartment. When Richie walked back into the bathroom, he caught Bill just in time to direct his mouth towards the toilet bowl, so he wouldn't throw up all over the floor.

Richie held his face in his hands as he cleaned his mouth. "Open your eyes, you're such a mess." He asked. When Bill didn't comply, he forced his eyes open, one at a time, checking his pupils.

Richie had learned how to take care of people too young. He knew what an overdose looked like at 15 and had seen too many since then. He knew what it looked like when it got bad and Bill was on his way there if he kept going like this every other night.

"Bill." He slapped his face a couple times and once again all he got in response were some whines.

He decided to tuck him into bed and let him sleep it off, checking on him from time to time. He removed his wet clothes, dried him off as best as he could considering he was dead weight, and dressed him in a dry sweater and some sweatpants, guessing he would wake up cold as usual.

After taking a well-deserved hot shower and getting rid of the cum that was still on his stomach and thighs from the night before, he sat down on the small sofa they had placed across their shared bed, curling his legs underneath him so he'd fit fully on it, and picked up the book he'd been reading - "Song of Solomon", by Toni Morrison.

"Listen, baby, people do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can't help. Things that make us hurt one another. We don't even know why." He repeated the words, softly, only to himself, reading and rereading the passage, repeatedly. He folded the top corner of the page and smiled, before drifting off to sleep, book tightly held against his chest.

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Edward stepped into the building that served as his company's LA office. He greeted the staff the same way he always did: a nod and a "Morning", followed by their first name. He knew that the investors and his lawyer would already be inside when he walked in, something he loathed but had never told anyone. Something about walking into a room full of people whose livelihoods depend on you didn't sit right with him. Still, Connor insisted he be the last one in the room, for "added effect", or whatever.

He took a couple deep breaths, before opening the door to the conference room and stepping inside. All the men went quiet on cue, and Edward felt his nose twist and his lips tighten. "Gentlemen." He greeted.

The men began sitting down, as Edward walked around the oval wooden table to reach his seat at the head of it, the back of his chair facing the city's skyline. He sat down and clicked his briefcase open. The others soon followed.

He liked being in control, something he never got to experience growing up as a feeble and meek little kid, raised by an overbearing, overprotective, workaholic mother, and an emotionally unavailable and depressed father, who died before he had time to form any memories of the man that could last past his 7th birthday. So, Edward would admit, yes, he liked owning a company, he liked being a millionaire , he liked having people at the ready to do his bidding for him, he liked the power that came with his status. He liked that,

in a professional setting, no one dared move a finger until he gave permission, always waiting on him to take the lead, to initiate the conversation.

After 24 years of his mother breathing down his neck, and 5 more of her implying he would never be successful, he bought her company, tore it into pieces which he then sold, and he only saw her again in her coffin, before it was lowered to the ground, to a whooping audience of 5 people, 3 of which were the priest and the graveyard staff. She had never been a people-person; Edward didn't think he was either. Luckily for him, he didn't care how many people were at his funeral, but he knew his mother would, a woman always looking to be the centre of attention, so it made him the tiniest bit satisfied, when only him and her caretaker showed up.

Some people implied, not so subtly, that he was a cold-hearted son of a bitch, for not really feeling much when his mother died. He knew it wasn't the most common reaction, but he also knew most people didn't have Sonia Kaspbrak as a parent. Maybe he was cold-hearted; maybe he was efficient in the way he decided to process his emotions, never letting them occupy too much of his time.

Edward tapped his fingers on the table, and heard the pens click and the legal pads open.

"Edward?" Connor asked.

Edward nodded giving the green light to begin the meeting, and immediately shut off his brain, as Connor, his (and the company's) lead attorney, went over the details of the new business deal – Uris's company, or the end of it.

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He woke up to Bill rummaging around the nearly empty fridge. They needed to go buy something to eat, but as Richie woke up further he remembered that what he had made the night before, was going

entirely to the rent, and Bill had snorted his half of it, so they'd have to see two or three men that night, if they wanted to cover rent, expenses, Henry's cut and food.

Bill hit his head on the wall a couple times before speaking in a low voice. "I'm sorry."

"You always are." Richie replies, standing up to decide what he would be wearing that night.

"I owe him 300 dollars."

"What?!"

"I'm sorry, I know, I'm sorry."

"God, Bill!" Richie sat on the bed and put his head in his hands, throwing on the floor the leather pants he'd been holding.

Bill leaned against the wall and slid down it until he sat on the floor with a thud. It was silent for a little bit until he spoke again, one of his famous fake promises. "I'm gonna get the money, okay? I'll get it tonight, I promise. I don't care how long I have to be out there."

"That is...if you can make it through the first John without shoving your head in a bag of cocaine. Right?" He picked the leather pants back up and pouted - if he wanted to make enough money tonight, he was gonna need to bring out the big guns. "Look, just- I thought we were gonna try to get rid of him, so we could actually keep the money we make, instead of giving him half. It's not gonna work if you keep sucking his dick for "free drugs"-" - he made air quotes with his fingers - "-that he will make you pay for anyway."

"We are- I am!" Bill replied.

Bill's eyes widened with curiosity when he saw the taller man pull out the tight blue denim shorts from the drawer. Richie glanced towards him and shrugged, pulling out the baby blue crop top right after. Bill raised his eyebrow and Richie smiled sheepishly. "Preppy schoolboy it is."

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Connor ordered another round of drinks for the table and grabbed Edward's shoulder. "We're about to be rich." He proclaimed.

Edward sipped his whiskey and side-eyed his attorney. "We're already rich."

"Richer, then." He shrugged.

Edward hated celebrating before a deal was complete and the papers were signed. Okay, fine, Edward hated celebrating, period. Connor, however, would take any excuse he could get to get drunk.

Edward wouldn't sit still, crossing and uncrossing his legs, folding his arms tightly against his chest, leaning back on the comfortable chair at the strip club, under the bright red lights, and pushing himself off the chair again, to rest his elbows on his knees. Connor had a woman sprawled across his lap and was doing shots off the dip on her lower back. He took a small bag of what Edward guessed was cocaine and poured it above her G-string, in two thin lines. Edward downed the rest of his whiskey as the other man snorted the white powder up his nostril, pinching the bridge of his nose and tilting his head back afterwards.

"Give me your car keys." He blurted out.

Connor looked back at him, sweaty forehead and pupils dilated. He looked out of his mind. "I'm not giving you my sports car."

"You're not gonna drive it anyway, not like that. Take a cab, give me the keys."

"Where will you go?" He asked, the stripper still grinding on him. Connor picked up some coke on the back of his hand and handed the young girl a rolled up $50 bill. She appeared to be an expert, Edward noted.

"I will drive around and then to my hotel. Keys."

Connor signalled at the girl to remove the keys from his pocket and she kneeled between his legs, spreading them before going at his pockets, a little too thoroughly. Edward rolled his eyes and then, finally, she handed him the keys, prompting him to leave.

He drove with the roof down, feeling the cold air in his hair as he sped down the streets of Hollywood. He longed for a hot shower and to sit on the sofa rereading the business deal papers. Perfectly boring and perfectly tame, just the way he enjoyed his evenings.

He wondered if he should call Myra, then looked at the time and realized she was probably with her lover. Yes, his fiancée saw other men, not that he cared. It was the price to pay for being gay and proposing to a woman you had no intention to touch. She had agreed to marry him, despite her better judgement, Eddie knew this. She was a wealthy young woman, in need of a wealthy man who could provide her with the lifestyle she had been raised in and grown accustomed to.

He didn't blame her for searching for love, sex, lust – whatever – in the arms of someone else, so he pretended not to know and made excuses for the both of them, for the sake of both her reputation and his pride as a man. She was only 28 and, despite having been quite infatuated with him in the beginning as a young girl, that infatuation diminished very quickly after they actually began seeing each other, and he refused to have sex – something girls of her calibre and looks were not used to in NYC's high society. She had been a debutante; and now she was planning her wedding to a gay man she didn't love and who could possibly never make her happy, aside from the security he provided financially.

Her father, Edward's business partner from a few years back, had given his blessing to the marriage, probably before Edward had even considered taking the young girl as his wife. She had only been 21 when they met, him 34, so the enthusiasm of old man Rutherfurd was suspicious and, to be honest, kind of gross. So, Edward waited for her to turn 25. Less gross, he thought. He'd like to believe it was less gross.

And, no, he wouldn't say she knew he was actively cheating on her; in her mind he was just another man with mommy issues who

couldn’t get it up. Him possibly being with men would never cross her mind, even with the rumours and the endless women before her who had thrown themselves at him only to be turned down, because he was too busy getting his dick sucked by a random busboy at a dinner party.

So far, there had been no issues in getting caught, aside from the time Connor noticed the way he had been eyeing his pool-boy during a barbecue at his estate and confronted him; it only took a stellar hand job in the cellar, to keep him quiet though. Yes, Edward took pride in the fact he could get any men he wanted, even if it was 89% due to his bank account.

He opened the glove compartment in the sports car and sighed in relief when he found a pack of cigarettes. He took one cigarette from the pack and lit it up. He took a puff and immediately began coughing immediately. It had been a while since he smoked, and Connor's brand was purely nasty. He felt his throat burn and his eyes watered so much he stopped seeing the road for a few seconds. Luckily, it was 12am, so the amount of cars was minimal.

In his struggle to see out of the windshield he had taken a couple, maybe more, wrong turns. He had no idea where he was, until he saw the sign. He read it out loud and felt something catch in his throat: Hollywood Blvd.

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Richie smoked a cigarette and scratched under the hem of his wig, leaning against the concrete building. A red neon sign flashed above him, illuminating his skin in incandescent light. His eyes were enticing, inviting, but behind them hid the alertness that came naturally with his job description. He looked over at Bill, in ripped jeans and a fully unbuttoned patterned t-shirt, exposing his abs, bent over, head inside the passenger window of a car. Bill pulled out of the window, hitting his head on the way, prompting Richie to bend over laughing.

"What? You never hit your head, you fucking Yeti?" He screamed walking in his direction.

Richie took his index finger to his lips. "Shh..." He snickered. "You're scaring away the customers."

"What customers?" Bill asked, more of an observation than a question. "Did they all decide to come out of the closet and run off with their lovers, or something? Where are the desperate repressed men?"

"Relax. Someone will show."

"If Henry shows up my ass is getting put in a grinder." Bill huffed and sat on the pavement.

Suddenly, a sports car pulled up. It was very rare that men with money went to the BLVD looking for sex, when they had expensive escort services available. Richie saw the car stop just a few feet away from him and Bill, staying on the curb.

Bill looked down at himself, then he eyed Richie up and down. "Go."

Richie grinned and pushed off the wall, walking slowly to the car. In the back he could hear Bill, cheering him on. "Work it, work it, atta boy, Rich!"

He leaned over and taped softly on the window with two-knuckles. The window rolled down slowly to show a man inside and Richie felt the need to take a seat and decompress for a few minutes. He was good looking. No, fuck that. He was gorgeous. Almost too gorgeous. There must be something wrong with him, men like that don't show up at the BLVD. Richie snapped out of it and leaned further down, to a 90-degree angle.

"Are you lost or looking for company?"

The man smiled and bit the inside of his bottom lip. Richie almost collapsed.

"Lost. You don't happen to know how I can get to the Beverly, do you?"

'Fuck, his voice is sexy. Fuck me. I'll do it for free.' Richie thought. "Disappointing." He said instead.

"What is?"

"That you're just lost."

The man chuckled and looked through the rear-view mirror before speaking again. "So, you're not gonna help me?"

"It's 5 dollars for directions."

"I only have 20s." He held up a bill.

Richie signalled at Bill before opening the car door and hopping inside. He put on the seatbelt and leaned back, feeling the expensive leather of the sports car. He took the bill and crumpled it into his very small shorts' pocket. "For 20 you get a guide for the full ride and I'll even see you to the door."

The man said nothing, simply starting the car. The engine made a pleasant noise and Richie sunk further into the seat.

He kicked off his shoes and pointed at the intersection. "Go left, there."

He felt himself be looked at top to bottom and resisted stealing a look for himself, as well.

"What's your name?"

"What do you want it to be?" He replied fast, habit kicking in.

The man cocked his head to the side, unamused.

"Richie." He resisted an urge to smile.

"It suits you."

Richie stared out the window and suddenly felt sleepy. Car rides through the city had always made him sleepy. He looked back. "What's yours?"

"Edward."

"Of course, it's rich sounding."

"And Richard isn't?"

"That's why I go by Richie."

A few more moments of silence passed before Richie's face lit up. "Can I call ya Eddie?!"

"Absolutely not."

Richie pouted immediately. "Okay, it's right around that corner. You can drop me here, if you don't want them to s-" His hand was already on the seatbelt.

Edward grabbed his hand, and they shared a look. "I paid 20. I'm getting walked to the door."

"Alright, bossy man."

The hotel chauffeur took the car once they got to the entrance. Richie pretended not to be surprised when the driver immediately recognised Edward, even referring to him as Mr. Kaspbrak and bowing his head slightly before leaving them outside. He also pretended not to notice the weird look the driver gave him, the one that prompted Edward to give him his overcoat.

"You've been delivered, Mr. Kaspbrak."

"Do not."

Richie swayed a little bit in his shorts and crop top and began removing the overcoat, which was very much not his size. "Alright, Edward, it was nice meeting you."

"Keep it. You'll probably get beat up if you walk around in those clothes."

Richie's stomach tied into a knot. He was right. "That's very nice of you, but-" He removed the coat and folded it semi-properly, handing

it over. "I can't do that. Thank you, I'll take my chances in shiny old LA."

Edward blinked and stood still as a statue as he watched the 6'2" man climb onto the bus-stop bench, and sit on the head rest, legs parted and elbows in his knees. He swore he would regret this decision later, he knew he would, but- It was LA, so fuck it. He wanted in on those tight, tight, shorts.

"So..." He began.

Richie looked back at him and held his face in his hand with a smug look and raised eyebrows.

"How much for you to stay the night?" Edward completed.

Richie jumped off the bench obnoxiously and smiled. Edward found it endearing, which was a very inconvenient thing.

"275."

Edward looked up at the night sky and Richie puckered his lips. A knowing smile crossed his lips as Edward wrapped his coat back over Richie's shoulders. "After you."

Richie walked towards the hotel entrance and climbed the steps, slowly, with Edward following close behind and grabbing at the back of the coat for some contact. He felt all the eyes on him as they walked across the hotel lobby prompting him to instinctively wrap the coat tighter around his broad figure, trying to make himself look smaller. *The elevator has a fucking man to press the buttons, I can't believe rich people.*

"Mr. Kaspbrak." The young man working the elevator that night greeted with a slight head bow.

He gave the young man a head nod and pulled Richie inside.

"Are you like...a count or something? What the fuck?" He whispered.

Edward stifled a laugh. "Hush."

The young man tightened his lips and Richie knew he wanted to laugh.

"Penthouse, please." He requested.

The bellhop pressed the top button and the elevator doors closed. In a few seconds they had reached the top. Edward rest his hand on Richie's lower back, over the thick coat fabric and guided them out.

"Have a good night, Mr. Kaspbrak."

"Thank you. Goodnight."

Richie did a theatrical courtesy and winked at the bellhop, causing Edward to facepalm and the bellhop to tighten his lips and hold in a smile for the second time.

"Does everyone treat you like that?" Richie asked, once the elevator was fully closed and the shiny buttons above it indicated it was going back down.

Edward walked towards the penthouse door and opened it, pulling Richie gently inside by his arm. "Most people do." He answered.

"What's that li- Wow!" He interrupted himself as soon as he set eyes on the room. "Oh, hell yes!" He immediately ran towards the balcony and held on to the railing, peeking outside. The view was breath-taking.

Edward took off his suit blazer and hung it on the back of the chair, then he undid his tie and folded it neatly, resting it on the table. He undid the top two buttons of his white shirt as he walked towards Richie and leaned on the doorframe which led to the terrace and, thus, the balcony.

"Can you not hang off it, like that?" He asked, his voice calm.

Richie listened and immediately pushed off the railing. "You have a fear of heights?"

Edward exhaled. *I am not about to explain myself to a male prostitute.* "Yes." He answered finally.

"Then why would you get the penthouse?"

"Because it's the best room."

Richie walked back inside and started touching every surface, running his fingers through the curtains, the couch pillows and covers, the dining table, the thick wood of the chairs. Edward just stood in place, watching him explore the room. Richie almost hated everything about the place, the pompousness of it all. He could smell the money in every object. He thought of the way Edward was treated, like he owned the hotel and the people working in it – and maybe he did own it, what the fuck did Richie know about this guy, other than his name?

Edward was watching him so close he could feel his skin burning, and not in the way he liked it. He was used to his clients being on the shyer side, men who wanted to get fucked and couldn't exactly ask their wives to peg them, as much as they couldn't come out. Richie had met every type of man in this job, and he had never envied any of them. Edward on the other hand, was rich. Super fucking rich. Also, way more attractive than his usual clients (aside from Mike, he recalled; Mike was a fucking hunk). Why he had any need to pay for sex, Richie had no idea. Especially, to pay a guy he picked up on the side of the road in Hollywood BLVD. He could afford better, Richie knew that. Escort services were more famous than ever, too.

Richie spent a few minutes trying to decipher the man standing on the other side of the room, but he was impenetrable – *go fucking figure*. He reeked of lonely businessman, in his perfect suit, driving his expensive (ugly) sportscar through the streets of Hollywood, getting lost and throwing $20 on a male prostitute's face for directions, because he had no better use for his money. He probably wiped his ass on the 10s, so…good for Alexander Hamilton, he guessed.

Richie got tired of thinking and of waiting for Edward to make a move. He kicked off his light blue trainers and took off his school-boy socks. Edward cocked his head and smiled a little, as Richie walked over to him.

"So." Richie began.

“So.”

Richie reached for his pockets and pulled out a rainbow selection of condoms. He took another step, towering over Edward, who in return was looking up at him, hot breath tickling Richie’s neck. Their bodies were touching, and Richie could feel Edward’s belt buckle against his body.

“I got blue, I got pink, I got green, I got yellow-”

“Are you hungry?” Edward interrupted.

Richie’s eye twitched. “M’sorry?”

“Are you hungry?”

Richie was frozen in time, still holding up the display of condoms. Edward put his hands on Richie’s and lowered his arms. He began putting the condoms slowly back in his pockets, as he watched Edward walk slowly to the telephone and dial what he assumed was the front desk. As he ordered strawberries and champagne, he pointed to the TV, which Richie took as an order and saluted him in response, prompting Edward to smile and turn around to hide it.

By the time he sat down on the armchair, Richie was laying on his stomach in front of the TV, legs crossed at the ankles and swinging up and down like a kid.

“Having fun?”

Richie turned around with a strawberry in his mouth and smiled, biting down on it. “Hm.”

“Hm?” Edward raised his eyebrows, to which Richie nodded in confirmation.

The shorter man grabbed his briefcase and clicked it open, a light brown folder appearing in his hands. He closed it, without clicking it shut, and walked to the armchair, which stood off to the side of the TV, where he could work without the distraction of the movie playing, but still able to watch Richie. He had realized by now that he liked to watch him, he liked it very much.

“Do you just work all the time?” Richie asks at one point, another strawberry in his mouth.

“Yes.” He doesn’t take his eyes away from his papers.

“What do you do?”

“I own a company.”

“Okay, what does the company do, then?”

Edward rests the papers on his knee and looks down at Richie, who is pouring champagne in a glass. Edward thinks he’s going to down it, so he is surprised when Richie hands it to him. He takes it and sips a couple of times, before setting it down on the little coffee table, between the armchair and the TV.

“I buy off other companies that are on their way to bankruptcy and I break them apart to sell the pieces.”

“Is that legal?”

“Yes, Richard, it’s legal.”

Richie whines angrily at the sound of his full name, then asks, just curious. “You married?”

“Engaged.”

“To like…a woman?”

Edward nods, although the answer seems obvious and he’s not entirely sure why Richie would consider the opposite to be a possibility.

“I could never do that, I don’t think.”

Edward just watched him and waits for him to continue.

“Number 1, it wouldn’t be fair to her.” Richie says.

“And number 2?”

“It wouldn’t be fair to me.” Richie blinks slowly and looks back at the TV, appearing to be done with the conversation.

Edward doesn’t push, but he keeps watching the man lying on his penthouse floor. He isn’t *that* much younger than him, but he has a childlike energy to him that Edward likes, wants to get closer to, to be around. He felt that the second he sat next to him in the car. He hated “free-spirits”; Richie didn’t seem like a free-spirit. He seemed like the kind of guy you’d be okay getting lost in the city with, granted he didn’t know him well enough to justify this.

Edward never did things on a whim; never did something just because he wanted to. All his decisions were calculated carefully, from what he had for breakfast, lunch and dinner, down to the woman he chose to be his wife. He picked her because she came from a good respectable family, had a post-grad in philosophy and economics from Yale (despite not planning on putting the degree to use), possessed social status which that warranted respect from strangers, was okay with him never touching her, was, albeit unknowingly, on board with helping him keep up appearances and accompany him on business dinners and deals, because a 41 year old rich man showing up without a woman in his arm was suspicious and he couldn’t keep risking it.

However, that night, his instinct told him to bring Richie upstairs and ask him to stay the night, and for the first time since he could remember, he listened to what he wanted, and not to the voice that told him all day long what *Edward Kaspbrak, CEO* should do. He said no to what was acceptable, expected, and accepted the part of him that wanted the boy in those shorts naked in his bed.

He hadn’t slept with a man in a long time, now that he thought about it. Not since him and Myra had announced their engagement, so… barely 6 months ago, at *least*. So, he thought, maybe his inability to resist Richie was just the consequence of a serious case of blue balls. Maybe if it hadn’t been so long since the last time he had sex, he would have just let Richie hop on that bus and go back to where Edward had found him, maybe he would be with another man by now, looking the way he did.

Richie laughed hard at the movie on TV and Edward smiled, before

reaching for the remote and turning it off, bringing the lighting of the room down to a warm and cosy yellow which came from the lamp on the table where Edward's champagne glass still stood, now void of bubbles, stale.

Richie looked up and unlocked his ankles immediately, letting his legs rest on the carpet. He shifted to a sitting position and then got on his knees, crawling towards Edward, until he was kneeling in front of him. He held his knees slowly and parted his legs so he could position himself between his thighs. Richie reached for his pocket for the second time that night and pulled out a condom at random, assuming (correctly) that Edward didn't care.

He held the condom wrap between his teeth, unopened, and caressed the inside of Edward's thighs, slowly at first, only running his fingers over the fabric, but then harder, squeezing them. Edward pushed himself off the armchair and leaned over, his face inches away from Richie's, who still had a condom held between his lips.

"What do you do?" He asks, voice deep, sending Richie's brain offline.

Richie removes the condom from his mouth. "Everything." He was on autopilot; something he had eventually learned to do, after years in the game. "Except, kiss on the mouth." He completes.

Edward runs his fingers down Richie's jawline. "Oh, too intimate for you, is it?"

Richie laughed quietly and watched Edward sit back on the armchair, his eyes even darker than before. He opened the condom wrap with his teeth and Edward visibly shuddered. Richie palmed his crotch and felt his body give in under his hand, his dick hardening. "Top or bottom?" He asks, with a curious grin.

Edward squints looking almost insulted by the question and grabs the condom, snapping his fingers at Richie and pointing at his crotch, so he'd undo his belt and pants.

"Thank fuck." Richie lets out and goes at his belt buckle and zipper.

“Thank fuck?”

Richie doesn’t reply and instead motions for Edward to buck his hips up so he can pull down his pants.

“So.” Richie yanks his pants down, revealing black briefs.

“So.”

“Are you ready, Mr. Kaspbrak?” He winks. Edward’s cock twitches visibly, and he pulls down his boxers.

He’s not *big*, Richie wouldn’t say he’s big. However, that doesn’t bother him much, because his ass hole is out of practice and he’s tired and wants to sleep, so the more time they can save on prepping him the better. He sizes it and decides that the stretching he had gotten done at home would probably still work well enough.

He watches patiently as Edward rolls the condom down and, once he’s done, he lunges forward and licks along the shaft slowly, but with pressure, knowing it’s harder to feel over the latex, and peeking up from his glasses, which have already started fogging up. Edward breathes heavily and throws his head back on the armchair but regains his composure enough to remove Richie’s glasses for him and folding them on the table. Richie sucks on the tip and jerks him off a couple of times, to get him fully hard.

Edward pets his head and shoves his fingers in Richie’s hair. “Easy…” He sighs, content. “Easy.” Demanding, now.

Richie spreads his thighs, so his butt can rest on the floor and he can get ready to swallow him deeper. It *sucks*, pun not intended, so he shuts down further, hoping Edward will manhandle him and get them to the bed, so they can get this over with. Richie sucks at the tip mechanically and then pushes forward, taking him fully in his mouth, surprised to learn that *Edward Kaspbrak is a grower* once the head hits the back of his throat. He chokes, but only because he’s surprised – don’t take away his dignity as a certified sex worker – and Edward seems to thoroughly enjoy the sound of Richie struggling to breathe, because he pushes forward and fucks into his mouth in a few frantic, hard thrusts. He pulls out, fists still closed and filled with Richie’s

hair, who in turn is looking right through Edward, with watery eyes and spit dribbling down his chin.

Edward reaches for Richie, still stuck in half dissociation, and touches his jawline again, wiping off the mess off his chin and then wiping his fingers on his thighs, in a quick succession. If he knew how far away Richie's mind was at that moment, it would almost look like he was trying to bring him back; yet he didn't know. Richie came back online, just in time to help Edward pull off his crop top.

Edward stared at Richie's chest for a good 15 seconds, until it got weird. *Fuck.*

"Something wrong?" Richie asked, forcing himself to stay grounded.

Yeah, you're huge. "No."

Silence. Followed by more staring. Followed by more silence. Richie was cold, he was tired, and his dick was going soft. He didn't remember it ever being this bad in years.

He fumbled with the hem of his denim shorts. "Look, Mr. Kaspbrak, we don't have to do this, if you don't-"

Edward felt his skin go hot. It was usually so easy for him to just take what he wanted from other men, why was he suddenly bad at this? When had he gotten bad at this? Was he suddenly growing a conscience over cheating on Myra, because now they were engaged, and it was becoming more and more real to him that soon they'd exchange vows, vows that he would fully disrespect? Was it because he wanted Richie, too much? Was *actually* attracted to him?

"Take off your shorts and lay on your stomach."

Richie tensed up, and then relaxed again. He unbuttoned his shorts slowly, not taking his eyes off Edward, who was still standing in his shirt, cock still hanging firm. Richie had no underwear on. Edward blinked a few times at the realization.

"They don't fit as well, if I- So- Yea." He fumbles his words. He never thought he'd miss toping, but there he was, wishing Edward were one of the messy repressed ones he had to take care of as they cried with

their faces buried on the pillow, under Richie. He thought bottoming would give him a break, that he wouldn't have to do any work or even be aware for it.

Richie laid down on his stomach and waited for Edward to climb onto the bed and kneel behind him, but Eddie was still standing up, next to the bed, and Richie could feel the hesitation.

"Man-" Richie began, but was interrupted when he heard shuffling and felt the mattress dip behind him.

Two strong hands grabbed the back oh his thighs and squeezed hard. Richie closed his eyes and braced himself, fisting the sheets, unsure of what to expect; but Edward began caressing his thighs with the tips of his fingers, and Richie felt himself relax against the mattress. *Is he nervous? He seems nervous.*

"Back pocket." Richie offered.

Edward was pulled away from his adoration of Richie's body. He was fucking beautiful, it almost felt wrong to be paying for this. He was aware of how ridiculous he must look right now, how awkward this must be for Richie, to just stand or lay there and have this stranger gawk at him instead of doing what he was paying for. Richie did say he did *everything*, so Edward was, for his own sake, including voyeurism in that. He had already lost his mind so easily at seeing Richie's mouth around his dick that he fucked into his mouth without warning, so what was going to happen when he finally went inside of him? Edward could feel his brain slowly turning into pudding.

"What?" He asked.

"My back pocket, on my shorts. Lube."

Edward looked at the floor and the clumsily dropped pair of shorts. He hung off the bed and reached for them, taking a small bottle of lube from the back pocket, as promised. When he looked back at Richie, he was holding his dick in his hand, stroking himself slowly, trying to regain his hardness. His lips were parted slightly, and his brows were pushed together, as he watched himself. He licked his lips and Edward's cock started dripping at the sight of him. Richie

looked up at him and smirked.

Fucker.

Edward climbed back onto the bed. His hand felt warm when it rested on Richie's lower back. Richie almost jumped at the sound of the bottle opening. Then Edward's deep voice. "You wanna get on all fours for me?"

"Oh!" Richie looked startled. "You're sure you wanna top-"

Edward gripped Richie's hips and forced him onto his knees, his ass up. Richie felt his eyes go heavy as the man behind him pushed two fingers coated in a generous amount of lube against his rim.

Edward's mouth dropped open as his fingers disappeared inside Richie with ease, like he had prepped before. "Are you-"

Richie knew he meant if he was stretched and ready, so he nodded. As soon as the tip of Edward's dick was inside him, Richie's brain hit the light switch. He could still feel, but he wasn't there, not really. He felt it when Edward pushed in, he felt him let him adjust, he felt him start to move in and out of him. It was pleasant, definitely better than the blowjob, and suddenly Richie felt bad, and he felt ugly, and his wig was fucking *itchy*.

Edward, on the other hand just felt subconscious. At how quiet Richie had gotten, at how fucking fast he was about to blow his load. *Oh, what the fuck-* He leaned his body forward and wrapped an arm around Richie's waist, holding him closer, fucking him deeper. Richie's knuckles were white, his hands gripping the sheets with force. Edward placed a hand on Richie's shoulder blades, with the same tenderness he had petted his head on the armchair before. "Easy, Richie."

With that, Richie came alert just in time for Edward hitting his prostate, once, twice, three times, before he was cumming behind him, in a rapid sequence of clumsy thrusts, as he rode it out. Richie could feel his eyes water, then Edward pulled out of him, and collapsed on the mattress face down. Richie rolled over and laid on his back, blinking several times as he adjusted to the low lighting of

the room and came back to full consciousness. He was still hard, his dick dripping from the tip.

Edward sighed and got out of bed. *Fuck, I feel terrible.* He walked to the bathroom and closed the door behind him, all without saying a word to the man still lying on his bed. A man he failed to get off, no less. *Ugh.* He threw the used condom in the trash, properly closed with a knot, of course, and sat on the toilet seat, with his head in his hands, slowly hating himself. He looked up and caught his reflection in the mirror. “What the fuck are you doing, man?” He stood up and got himself in the shower, washing his shame down the drain with the hot water and dreading walking back into the room.

Once Richie heard the shower go off, his head hit the mattress hard and his hand went down to his crotch. He wrapped one hand around his arousal and placed the other over his mouth. Pre-emptive action. His feet dug into the mattress as he stroke his erection to submission, paying attention to the sound of the shower and the possibility that he would have to stop. He felt the tension build up on his lower stomach and braced himself for it, lips tightening under his large hand. He gave it two more pumps and suddenly he was spilling all over his stomach and chest. Richie heard the shower turn off, felt the shiver that ran down his spine, telling him he was cold, and then he felt his lids go heavy, but in the way they would when he was tired, not when he was beginning to shut down with a client.

He stood up and wiped the cum off his stomach as best as he could with the Kleenex tissues he peeped when he first arrived at the room (and made a mental note of). He looked at the clock on the nightstand, marking 2:14am. As shitty as the whole ordeal had been so far, he knew Edward wouldn’t kick him out at that hour, and he *had* asked how much for the *night*, so Richie thought it was probably safe to pull the covers back and get in bed. He took off his wig and put it down on the dresser, scratching the top of his head, really sinking his nails on his scalp. *Ahh, fuck, that’s good.* He was out the second his head hit the soft white pillow.

Edward dried himself off with the towel. He felt slightly better, yet apprehensive about having to face the man on the other side of the door. He folded the towel lazily over the towel heater and fought the urge to bang his head on the bathroom wall. *Great, I didn’t grab*

underwear. He stared at himself in the mirror for a few more minutes contemplating jumping off the building and then turned the door handle, peaking his head in. The lights were off, and it was awfully quiet. He suddenly found himself hoping Richie hadn't just left after that sad performance, because he still had to pay him and if he remembered correctly, he had asked for him to stay the night.

He opened the door enough to be able to fit through the frame, and tip toed 6 feet into the room, before realizing Richie was in his bed, sleeping and- *Oh…* He was not blond. Edward scanned the room as he picked a t-shirt and a pair of boxers from the drawers, noticing, on the far right, the wig Richie had worn that night.

The little light that reached the bed illuminated Richie's face in a way that made him look even younger, softening his features and strong jaw. Edward allowed himself to take him in for a few minutes. He really was a beautiful young man, Edward guessed he should be in his late 20s. Richie made a small content noise in his sleep and a smile twisted the corner of Edward's lips. Richie looked comfortable and warm, and it softened the edges of Edward's body, still riled with tension. He walked quietly to his side of the bed and pulled the covers back, getting under them. Richie, either on reflex or in his dreams, rolled over, facing Edward.

He held his breath afraid Richie would wake up that close to his face, only letting it out once he was sure Richie was asleep. His hair was a dark brown, almost ratty colour. *Better.* He wanted Richie to open his eyes so he could inspect how different the blue of them looked with the dark hair, compared to the blond. It was longer too, shaggy, and Edward resisted the urge to shove his fingers in it. Instead, he closed his eyes and fell asleep, with Richie's warm skin radiating heat against him.

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Edward got up early, got dressed and ordered breakfast – well, he ordered *everything* on the breakfast menu. He had placed a robe for

Richie on the foot of the bed for when he woke up, which he hoped would be soon, otherwise he would be late for work and he really didn't want to go wake the guy up, on the off chance it would look like he was kicking him out.

Just as if Richie could read his mind, he walked into the dining area of the penthouse, tired little smile on his face, to match the messy hair and glossy eyes. He put his hand up near his face and waved. *Tiny.*

"He lives." Edward teased.

Richie pointed to his hair and smiled. "Dark."

"Better."

Silence filled the room like it had done so many times the night before. However, unlike the silences Edward was used to, it wasn't awkward or judging, it was comfortable, like they knew what was left unsaid, like Richie understood.

"Sit." Edward pointed to one of the chairs. "I ordered everything; I didn't know what you would like."

Richie opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it, then closed it.

"Are you- are you not hungry? Should I not hav-"

"No." Richie blurted out, louder than intended. "I- no, it's not that, I- Sorry. You just- you didn't have to."

Edward smiled and sipped his coffee. "I know. I wanted to."

Richie sat down next to him, folding one leg under his butt, and Edward found himself wondering how he was that flexible when he was that tall and *oh- Yeah, the flexibility checks out with the job description.*

"What?" Richie asked, eyes on his thighs once he realized Edward was staring at them too.

“Nothing. Does it not hurt you to sit like that?”

Richie shrugs and shoves a whole folded pancake in his mouth. Edward ignores the memory of the blowjob from the night before.

“Do you mind if I use your shower?” Richie asks.

“No, but you will have to show yourself out, then.”

Richie gives an inquisitive look and gnaws at a slice of pineapple.

“I have work, I’m late already.”

“Don’t you own the company?”

Eddie frowns. “Yes?”

“Then you don’t have a schedule, not really. If you answer to yourself.”

“I suppose.” Eddie looks away, then back at Richie. “You’ll be alright to go home? I can get you a car-”

“I’ll be fine, Eddie. You’ve done enough.” Richie interrupts.

“Absolutely not. No to the nickname.” He argues, but the smile is apparent as he swings his suit jacket around his shoulders.

“I’m never gonna see you again, why oppose?”

When Edward only smiles, Richie gets up and walks over to him, straightening his collar. “Thank you for choosing Richie Tozier Services. We hope you enjoyed your ride.”

“I’ll leave the money on the bed, okay? Go take your shower.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Kaspbrak.” He saluted and walked to the bathroom.

Edward shook his head. Impossible. Richie disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Edward opened his wallet and took out $275 dollars, which he then placed on the bed. His chest was doing something weird, which he promptly ignored as soon as the phone went off.

“Edwardddd” The voice on the other hand called obnoxiously.

“Are you hungover? I am not giving you the morning off.”

“I’m fine, I’m fucking with you.”

“Mhm.” Edward sat down and began putting his shoes on.

“So.”

“So.”

“What did you end up doing last night?”

Richie could be heard from the bathroom. *Is he singing? He’s singing.* Edward smiled despite himself, a reflex he developed rather quickly from having Richie over. “Nothing, I just drove back to the hotel.”

“You have that dinner with Uris, tonight, can Myra make it?”

Oh baby, I want to get wit'cha

And take your picture

My homeboys tried to warn me

But with that butt you got-

Edward scratches his forehead with his thumb and suppresses a laugh. “Why would Myra come?”

“You can’t just show up alone, man. You have to bring someone. Uris is bringing his wife.”

“Myra is busy.”

“Isn’t her being available to accompany you to business dinners the whole point of you having a beard?”

“Jesus Christ, Connor.”

“It’s what she’s *for.*”

“I-” Edward interrupted himself, listening to Richie’s voice. *What song even is this?*

Tell 'em to shake it, shake it

Shake that healthy butt

Baby got back

Baby got back

“Do I have to set you up with a friend? Or I can go myself, I guess?”

Edward was half-way through walking into the bathroom. He was barely paying attention to what Connor was saying anymore. He opened the door slowly, unbeknownst to the man lying on the tub. He had headphones on and was bopping his head as he sang along to the same song, white foam all over his hair and sitting on his head like a tiny hat. Edward shook his head. On any other occasion, he believed he would have been annoyed; so, the fondness slowly taking over his chest was a pleasant surprise. *Cute.*

“It’s a friendly dinner, Connor, bringing my lawyer would send a bad message.”

But I gotta be straight when I say I want to fuck

Til the break of dawn

Baby got it goin' on

“Yeah, a message that says we’re taking their fucking compan- What the fuck is that? Who’s singing?”

Edward smiled. “I don’t hear any singing.” And before Connor could ask again, “Tell them I’m bringing a friend.”

“What friend?”

“Do it. Bye, Connor.” He hung up the phone and sat down on the edge of the tub, snapping his fingers a couple of times to get Richie’s attention.

Richie opened his eyes and smiled, a little embarrassed, taking off the headphones.

“Hi.” Eddie was sitting with his legs crossed and a grin.

“Hi.” Richie blew on some foam that lay on his shoulder.

"Enjoying your little bubble bath?"

Richie flushed red at the question and Edward wanted to climb into that tub with him. The only thing stopping him was work and the knowledge that Richie was essentially bathing in his own filth and sweat. Still, Edward found him the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. It was going to be a problem, if Richie agreed to what Edward was about to propose.

"I need a date for tonight." His fingers curled next to his head, air quotes around the word date.

Richie looked down and picked up as much foam as he could in his hands. His big hands. Focus. He blew the bubbles all over the tub. "I never fit in a tub before." He smiled. He looked small.

"Oh?" Edward's lips rounded into a perfect O shape.

"So. A date?"

"Indeed."

Richie didn't want to assume Edward was asking him to be his

professional date, so he stayed quiet. He watched.

"I leave at the end of the week. How much for you to stay until then?"

Richie opened and closed his mouth a few times. "A- a whole week?"

"Yes."

Richie squinted. *Is this a game? I'll bite.* "Mm. Four thousand."

"Two.

"Three."

"Deal." Edward nodded, a knowing smile appearing on his lips.

Richie squealed and let his body slide down the tub, dunking his head completely under the water. He came up and Edward helped him brush his hair to the side and get rid of all the foam on his face.

"Baby, I'm gonna treat you so nice, you'll never want me to leave."

"Three thousand dollars, one week. And then, Richie, I will let you leave." He got up and walked towards the door, making note of asking Richie to buy a suit for dinner with the Urises.

"Hey, Eddie."

"Yeah?" He purposefully ignored the nickname.

"I would have stayed for two thousand."

"I would have paid four." He winked and walked out, leaving Richie to dry himself.

Notes for the Chapter:

You can find me on twitter HERE

Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

> Welcome back!
>
> So, not many warnings for this chapter.
> There is an instance of minimal physical assault, use of homophobic slurs and some descriptions of violence.
> Sex happens at the end of the chapter.
>
> Enjoy! :D

Richie put on his robe and really regretted not having worn underwear the night before. "I'm gonna walk around with my dick hanging all week." He muttered. *Three thousand dollars. Holy fuck*. He felt the relief spread down his shoulders and back - he could pay off Bill's debt and cover both their rents. Keeping Bill from getting beat up was a full-time job.

When he walked out of the bathroom and saw that Edward was still there, he was surprised. "Oh, you're still here."

Edward walked up to him and handed him a thousand dollars. "I need you to buy yourself a suit for tonight and some clothes for the week, okay? You'll be accompanying me to a few places and events."

Richie cleared his throat. "Places and events?"

"Yes, Richie. Is that okay?"

Richie was already half-way through a small panic attack. "Huh? Yeah. Great." He stared at the floor and took a couple small breaths.

"Richie, look at me."

He does.

"They're just people."

He nods a little too hard. "Oh-kay."

"Good. Have fun." He squeezed his arm and smiled, walking to the door.

Richie felt calmer, the feeling of Edward's hand wrapped around his arm still present. He guessed there could be worse things than having to spend a week pretending he belonged in high society, mingling with people he could not stand.

Eddie was nice. He was nice to him and Richie would never have guessed that just by looking at him. He was respectful, treated Richie like a human and not a fuck-toy. Or maybe that was just Richie's wishful thinking.

Edward opened the penthouse door, briefcase in hand, dressed in a nice navy suit, perfectly tailored and hugging his body in all the right places. His tie was black, matching his shoes.

"So, does this mean I can call you Eddie?"

He didn't reply, but Richie caught the smile on his lips from his peripheral vision.

"I'll see you later, Richie." He closed the door behind him.

"I'm still gonna call you Eddie." Richie yelled out.

The room fell silent once the door closed and Richie found himself sitting on the end of the bed, smiling. He fell backwards onto the mattress and felt his body relax, the soft bed giving in under him. *Where the fuck do I buy fancy clothes?* There was a sweet, cold, comforting breeze coming in through the balcony. *Edward must have opened it.* He walked outside, his feet bare on the tiles, and gripped the railing. The penthouse was high up on the top floor of the Beverly, and Richie could see the whole city from there.

Yeah, mom, take that. I'm in the fucking penthouse. He laughed at himself, at his own life, at the absolute insanity of the night before. "I'm an expensive whore, now. Are you proud, Went?" He looked towards the sky, at the mention of his late father's name. Yeah, this wasn't what he thought his life would be like when he was a kid. He

guessed it could be worse. He could be homeless; he could be dying. He could be in a warzone.

He had no one besides Bill. Maybe that was why he would put up with anything from him. He was poor and struggling to feed himself on top of a Los Angeles rent, when they met. Bill showed him the ropes of the city, introduced him to nightlife, to Henry, to the streets. He gave him a purpose, a job that actually paid the bills, a friendship. Bill became the only person Richie could count on. Chosen family.

Things started going downhill very quickly when Bill got involved with drugs, and Richie had to sit back and watch, helpless, unable to do anything. Bill was a fucked-up person, had been since he was a kid. Something within him died years before he and Richie even met, but Bill wouldn't talk about his childhood and after a while Richie quit asking. All he knew was that Bill had no problem with dying, as long as he didn't have to go through life sober. He felt too much. He wanted to feel less. Simple.

Richie on the other hand, swore off drugs pretty early on in his teenage years. He saw it slowly destroy his family, saw what crack did to his friend's parents back in Maine, he wanted nothing to do with it. Once Bill started sinking, it only cemented that decision further.

He didn't know how long he'd been standing on the balcony, but the sun was shining high and hitting his eyes now. He decided to go back inside and use the phone. He had to call Bill and let him know he was okay and, most importantly, that he had the money to pay off Henry.

He took the phone to the breakfast table and picked up some pineapple. A groan came through from the other end of the line.

"Bill."

"Ugh... R-Richie?"

He sounds like shit. "Hey, man." He couldn't hide the concern in his voice.

"Are you- fuck, fucking, move! Ugh, you lump. Are you okay, Rich?"

"Are you with someone?"

"He's a regular. Sleeps like a fucking pig."

"You got paid?"

"Yes. I have my half of the rent. Get off my dick." He gargled some water and spit it out.

"Well, guess what?"

"What?"

"This guy is paying me three thousand dollars to stay with him until the end of the week." Richie heard what sounded like Bill dropping something.

"What? Is he rich?"

"He's fucking loaded. I'm in the penthouse at the Beverly."

"He's loaded? What the fuck does he need you for?"

Richie played with the belt hanging from his waist. "He's sweet."

"Is he like...super ugly? What's wrong with him?"

"He's gorgeous."

"Fuck! I gave him to you!"

"I'm gonna leave you money in an envelope at the front desk for you to pay Henry what you owe him, you hear me? Beverly Wilshire Hotel, write it down, I gotta go now."

"I hate you."

"You're welcome."

Richie hung up the phone and leaned back on the chair, hands behind his head with his fingers locked. He stared at the ceiling and realised how high it was for the first time. "Rich people and their high ceilings." He swung back on the chair until the clock on the wall

caught his eyes. "Oh, shit!"

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Right. I can do this. I got it. Just- look confident, Rich. Confidence is key. If you act the part no one will say anything. I'm just a guy in short shorts and a crop top in the middle of Rodeo Drive. What's to see? There's nothing weird about that. People are definitely not looking. Fuck- they're definitely looking. Have you never seen a fag before, lady in the huge red hat?

"Fuck this." He muttered, opening the glass door to a random store, one of the dozen stores that made Rodeo Drive the place to go if you wanted to dress to impress, and decorated the street with colourful displays behind glass windows.

The temperature inside the store was cold and Richie knew he wasn't welcome there. He felt eyes pierce him and heard noses crinkle. A man at the far end of the store sized him up, raised his eyebrows and gave the security guard a look - *watch him.*

Richie inhaled and closed his eyes. *Breathe, breathe, breathe.* He fingered the hangers to his left; the soft fabric felt the way Richie imagined clouds would feel like. He moved further into the store, his steps loud on the white marble floors, echoing through the store.

He felt a sharp pain in his left forearm and turned his head to face the man standing next to him. He tried to release himself from his grip but failed.

"We must ask you to leave, sir."

"Excuse me?" His voice was barely audible. "Ahh-" He hissed at the increase in pressure.

"We don't have anything for you." The *people like you* was implied.

"I-" His eyes stung. "I- I have money."

The security guard eyed him up and down. "I'm sure you do."

"We would like you to leave." The store worker interjected.

Richie gritted his teeth. "Let me go, then."

The security guard dropped his arm and Richie walked out, tears working the back of his skull. His arm was burning, red. He wouldn't be shocked if it bruised. *Eddie will see. Fuck, Eddie is gonna see*. Richie took deep breaths and tried to steady his heartbeat. Eddie would see the bruise when he got home- to the penthouse, not home, the penthouse. Richie would have to tell him how he got it, Eddie would realise Richie didn't fit in with his crowd, he would send Richie home and no longer require his services. But Richie needed the money. Richie needed a *suit*.

He got on the first bus back to the Beverly and only felt how heavy his limbs were when he sat down. The woman sat across from him stared at his middle and then out the window, visibly uncomfortable. Richie was used to the looks, the comments, the names. It didn't get physical often, and maybe that was why he hadn't stopped staring at his arm. He didn't know what had ticked off the store employees - the fact he was a sex worker or the fact he was gay.

The walk from the bus stop to the hotel doors was excruciating. The floor didn't feel steady under his feet, as he climbed those few steps. Richie, whose job revolved around making himself known and making sure he was noticed before anyone else, wanted to be invisible in every other moment of his day to day life. Walking the hotel lobby only exacerbated that.

His senses were heightened, he could swear every single person was eyeing him up and down. The walls grew closer and closer together, preparing to swallow him whole, digest him and spit him out onto the streets again. He picked up the pace, paranoia setting in. Then a hand fell on his shoulder. All the blood rushed down to his feet.

"Excuse me, sir." A warm female voice.

Richie turned around, his eyes immediately reaching down to find a short female with red hair and freckles staring up at him. *Confidence,*

that's what that looks like.

"Miss Marsh." She stretched her hand out to him. He took it and shook it, no grip whatsoever. "And you are Mr.?"

"Tozier."

"And are you our guest, Mr. Tozier?"

"Well, I- I'm staying with, uhh… Eddie- Edward. Mr. Kaspbrak. Edward Kaspbrak."

"Mr. Kaspbrak didn't add a guest to his room or communicate that to the front desk."

"Can I just go up to my room, please?" He was tired. He was just too tired for this.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tozier. I can't allow strangers into the rooms."

Richie wanted to scream, or hide, or both. "But I'm-" He laid on the bellhop from the night before and pointed. A glimmer of hope. "Him! He knows me!"

"John." Miss Marsh called.

He walked over, and Richie could see him pray in his head that he wasn't about to be reprimanded by the tiny red headed woman. "Yes, M-Miss."

"Do you know Mr. Tozier, here?"

John cleared his throat and blushed slightly. "He came up with Mr. Kaspbrak last night, Miss."

Something akin to recognition flashed through her eyes and Richie felt his whole body heat up.

"Th-thank you, John. You may go." She waited for John to be out of earshot. "Would you please accompany me to my office, Mr. Tozier?"

Fuck.

She began to walk, and Richie understood he was to follow her immediately. The few seconds that passed from the moment Richie sat down to the moment Miss Marsh began talking felt heavy, draining all the oxygen out of the small office.

"Mr. Tozier, Mr. Kaspbrak is a very dear client of ours."

Richie remained quiet, sinking into the chair in a hopeless attempt to make himself appear smaller.

"However, we have a reputation. A reputation we work very hard to achieve and to keep."

I can't breathe.

"I assume you and Mr. Kaspbrak are...related?" She offered.

Richie could take a hint. He was used to being people's dirty little secret. "Yeah."

"And you are his…"

"Nephew?" He suggested.

"Perfect. So, I will simply ask you to dress less-" She stopped herself. "Dress in conformity to the hotel's, and its guests, standards."

And that was the phrase that sent Richie spiralling. "Well, I was fucking trying to get clothes-" He pulled out several bills from his pockets, which spilled all over his thighs and floor. "I tried but they wouldn't fucking let me in the stores, and I have all of this fucking money and I needed a suit for tonight and couldn't get one and Eddie-"

He shut up once he perceived Miss Marsh's blank expression and saw her hand pick up the telephone handset.

"Oh, great! You're calling the cops?"

Her lips went from a thin line to a warm smile once she heard the person on the other end pick up. "Hello, Ben? Hi, dear. I am very well, thank you." Her smile grew wider, it could be heard in her voice

now. "See, Ben, I have a very special guest at the hotel that requires your attention. He needs a suit for dinner. Yes." She tapped her fingers on the desk. "Oh, perfect, my darling. Thank you. I would love to- Yes. I will call later." She set down the handset and fixed her eyes on Richie.

Thank you, he mouthed.

--

The pressure of the deal was starting to get to him. This was easily the most important purchase of his career, and the company stood to profit millions off of it for years to come. He had to make Uris bend.

His dinners with clients pending a business deal were only friendly in name; he had them to find possible weaknesses, pressure points. The one tonight was no different. He wished Stan had thought twice before deciding to bring his wife to witness her husband's funeral. Eddie wasn't planning on holding back his punches just because the man's wife was present. He played dirty and thought very little about potential casualties. If she saw him as less of a man, then that was his own fault for bringing her along.

He thought about Richie and bit back the instinctual curling of his lips. He was most likely going to be a disaster with the Uris couple. Eddie only hoped he had managed to get a decent suit for dinner.

"-you're bringing?"

"What? Did you speak?" Eddie leaned back on his chair.

"I asked who's this friend you're bringing?" Connor repeated.

"Just a friend I have in town."

"Right, I'd believe that *if* you had any friends in any town, Edward."

"You're my friend. You live in a town."

"I don't think it counts if you cut me a check."

Oh, how ironic! "Cold."

Connor laughed. Edward found him obnoxious no matter what he did.

"You're sure you don't need me to come?"

"Why? So, you can be rude and off-putting? Try to fuck his wife?"

"Aw. Are you jealous?" He poured himself another cup of coffee.

Edward laughed. It was a ridiculous concept to imagine a world where he liked Connor and was jealous of him. He hated everything about the man, but he guessed it was good for business to hate your lawyer just a little bit. Connor was good for secret hand-jobs, while his wife and Myra shared vacation plans. Anything other than that? *No, thank you.*

"Is this friend you're bringing, what? A CEO? Lawyer?"

"He is...he's a salesman." Eddie raised his eyebrows. *High-quality product.*

Connor nodded, already uninterested in the answer.

--

The store was big, with a large spiral staircase leading to upper floors. He tried not to appear too out of place, but it’s hard to blend in when you’re 6’2” and have broad shoulders. Richie didn’t step too far into the store as a pre-emptive measure, but he could already feel the gazes coming from clients a few feet to his left. When a hand landed on his shoulder, he wasn’t surprised.

He looked over his shoulder, but there was no scowl, and there was no grip on his shoulder. It was a friendly pat. Welcoming. He was

met with a smile and a pair of hazel eyes.

“Hi, you must be Richie.” He took his hand and shook it.

This is a very smiley man. “Are you Ben?”

“Yes, Beverly- I mean, Miss Marsh, said you need a suit for dinner with your uncle?”

“My un- yeah, yeah, I need a suit for a fancy rich people dinner.”

Ben gave an honest laugh. Richie liked that. Rich people kept fake laughing. “I can definitely help with that.”

Richie scratched the top of his head, making his hair stick out a little. “Hey, Ben.”

“Yes.”

“He’s not actually my uncle.” He half-whispered, a cheeky smile on his lips.

“Oh, darling, are they ever?”

Richie snorted, caught off guard by the reply.

He felt overwhelmed but he was set on finding a good suit, because Eddie was counting on him and Richie took pride in his impeccable work ethic. He was Eddie's employee, that was the reality of it, and that meant he had a duty towards him. His role for the week was to make Eddie happy and ensure that Eddie would want to see him again next time he was in LA. Richie always looked to turn good clients into regulars, a way of avoiding having to see Johns who intended to rough him up a little too much.

Ben was nice to him, Richie observed, and he attributed this to Miss Marsh having put in the word for him. He didn't assume the man was nice to him out of the goodness of his heart. Instead, he believed the fact he was with Edward was the reason behind this treatment. He thought about that morning and wondered if he would have been treated differently had Edward been with him.

"How does that feel?"

"M'sorry?"

"How does the jacket feel? Comfortable? Too tight?"

"I have no idea how it should feel, Ben."

"Move your arms around a little. Take a few steps. Sit and stand up. See how it feels. It shouldn't feel tight on your shoulders, waist and underarms."

Richie followed those instructions and deemed himself satisfied. He hadn't seen himself in a suit since his father's funeral. He felt - and looked - different. He wasn't sure if it was a good or bad different yet.

The suit was navy blue tweed, accompanied with a classic white shirt. Richie decided against the tie, figuring the anxiety would cause enough constriction on his throat as it is. However, he couldn't resist the pocket square. Ben wouldn't let him leave without it, anyway.

In the end, Richie decided the suit was good enough. With it, he got underwear, proper black socks and shoes. Frankly, he wanted to get the fuck out of there and nap. He had never felt so out of place in his life, until meeting Eddie.

Walking back to the hotel, it dawned on him. He had been forgetting a small detail. *I have no idea how to eat fancy*. That was going to become a problem and after all the hits his self-esteem had taken the past day, he wasn't up for a bonus round of making a fool of himself for not knowing which fork to use. It wouldn't even be his fault, if he thought about it. *Why do rich people have to turn dining into rocket science? Who needs that many forks?*

He could see Miss Marsh's red hair from a distance and he practically rushed to her.

“Mr. Tozier. So nice to see you again.”

He pointed to the garment cover on his hand. "I got a suit. Thank you."

"Wonderful."

"I need your help."

Miss Marsh sighed and then inhaled sharply, her shoulders rising with it. "I go on my break in 20 minutes, can it wait until then?"

Richie nodded and smiled gratefully.

--

Edward thanked the chauffeur, tipped him and left the car, climbing the steps to the Beverly. He had an hour before they had to leave for dinner, so he rushed through the lobby, trying to make the elevator as quickly as possible. He had to shave and shower.

"Edward." The voice was familiar.

Fuck. He turned around, faking a smile to the best of his abilities.

"Bev."

"Do not Bev me. I had to pretend I only know you as Mr. Kaspbrak, VIP, today."

Eddie snorted. "So, I take it you met him?"

"Who? Your *nephew*?"

"Definitely not my nephew."

"Yeah, no shit, you're an only child." She was flushed red. It wasn't the first time she had to cover for his exploits with men.

"Do you know the kind of shit I would have gotten into if my superior found out I let a prostitute into the hotel? You could have added him as a room guest. You could have gotten him some clothes."

"I had to work, plus I did tell him to get clothes." He was too calm; it

prompted Beverly to take two deep breaths.

She removed some cotton from his jacket. "He's interesting."

"Hm?"

"Richie. He's...interesting."

"I guess." He knew very well Richie had an interesting effect on people. Eddie recalled how he caused the bellhop to nearly have a stroke from having to hide his laughter.

"I added him to the room, so he shouldn't have any more problems. You should be thankful I'm the one who noticed him."

"Thank you, Bev." He bowed his head slightly, in fake candour.

Richie wasn't in the penthouse when Eddie arrived. A note on the entrance table read *I'm at the bar downstairs.* On the bed, Richie's shorts and crop top were folded and Eddie recalled his reaction to Richie's shoulders and chest the night before. Then he realized he would have to see those same shoulders and chest in a fitted suit. He felt normal about it.

He took a look at his wristwatch and nearly had an aneurysm. Eddie despised when people were late, and he included himself in that. He held himself to the same standards he held everyone else. If there was one thing people could not use against him was hypocrisy, because he wouldn't be caught dead being a hypocrite.

Of course, he got in several arguments, and ruined several shirts with blood after drinking a few too many drinks and calling his "friends" and business partners out on their bullshit. In college, he was known for his right fist and its inability to stay at his side, flying at the jaw of anyone who dared insult his personal code.

It drove his mother up the wall, his lack of sense of self-preservation warranting several calls from the principal's office at his private school. She insisted he got into fights on purpose, for attention. Maybe in his late teens that statement held some truth to it, but not in the early years. He broke his arm at 12, because he swung his whole body to punch some other kid and ended up falling on his

elbow. The kid got a broken nose, so it wasn't for nothing.

He didn't get in as many fights anymore. He knew better now than to tarnish his reputation with talks about his short temper and anger management issues. His therapist enjoyed pointing out all of his flaws so much that after a while Eddie started beating her to it. But he was never violent unprovoked, and he always held it together around the ones that were important to him.

Beverly was one of those people. It was a shock to most people when he would let them into his private life long enough to confess that they had gone to college together, both business majors - Bev a minor in management, Eddie a minor in finance. Beverly was the first person to know he was gay and be fine with it. She didn't flinch at the confession, even when Eddie had been halfway through panicking the entire time. She had held his hands in hers and told him she would fight anyone who gave him shit.

Eddie remembered thinking she was ahead of her time. A young attractive woman from a wealthy family going to college in the 70s because she wanted to own her own business, refusing to marry or have children, and walking around with a closeted gay man with very serious mommy issues.

In the end, she ended up not opening her own business, scaling the ranks at the Beverly where she had started working as a maid mid-way through college, because she refused to live off of her parent's money. She made it to hotel manager by the time she hit 33. The first female manager and the youngest manager in the hotel's history. The fact she shared a name with the hotel only contributed to making Miss Marsh the legend she was.

Eddie had offered to give her money to start her business after he made his company hit its first million in raw profit. Even then, Beverly's pride and need to succeed in her own terms came out on top of what had been a very short conversation. Eddie could relate to that. The desire to separate yourself from your family and make a name for yourself in your own right was something Eddie respected.

God, Eddie respected the fuck out of Beverly. She came from a family of misogynists and submissive women, she realized it and she decided

she wanted nothing to do with it. Bravery seemed to come to her very easily, second nature even. Eddie wished he were more like her, but there he was, engaged to a woman, prepared to marry her just to avoid a couple rumours that he was gay. Didn't he owe it to himself to live honestly? He hated dishonest people, but he was the one who hid the biggest secret.

Richie said it wouldn't be fair to him to marry a woman and Eddie found himself thinking of that, how brave that was. Surrounded by brave people and still so afraid.

The company, the money, the payback against his mother. He had done it all in an attempt to regain control of his life. He had disposable income - more than he could spend -, he had status, respect from peers. However, he wasn't living the way he wanted. The way he truly wanted. He didn't remember the last time he had woken up feeling fulfilled, maybe he never did. All that respect from total strangers and still he couldn't honestly say he had any respect for himself.

He ignored these feelings for his own sake. If he dwelled too much on it he would spiral and have a repeat of the summer of 89, when his stupid 35 year old self decided that a Safari, in Africa of all places, was what he needed in order to feel connected. He hated everything about that experience, and he wasn't about to risk it by having another crisis in self-identity.

He ran his fingers along his jawline. One more pass, just to be sure. He spread a new layer of shaving cream on his cheeks, lathering it up well, and picked up the razor. He liked being clean shaven, yes, but he did it more for the ritual. Those twenty minutes always felt good. It was a time for himself and his pointless fits of introspection.

That morning he hadn't managed to get his ritual done, the late night with Richie causing him to sleep in for a while longer than usual, and so he had spent half the way wondering why he felt so weird, and the other half itching to get to the hotel so he could get rid of the shadow of hair already growing back.

Waking up that morning had been a new experience. He had never actually slept with a man, as in, had sex and then shared a bed. It

was new. He didn't know if he liked it yet, but he guessed the next few nights would give him more than enough time to figure it out. He wasn't fluent in the intricacies of romance and relationships, not that this, with Richie, was at all romantic or a relationship. Still, he felt there were rules he didn't know. Was he supposed to take Richie out? Was he supposed to plan things for them? Or was he just gonna leave Richie locked in the penthouse while he went to work and fuck him once he got back? Is that what Richie expected?

He was driving himself crazy. His skin felt raw under the razor and he figured he was pushing his luck with the elasticity of his skin and its endurance. He washed his face with cold water and watched himself in the mirror for a few seconds, before applying his moisturizer, followed by his aftershave.

Eddie spent 15 minutes doing and redoing his tie knot until he felt comfortable with how it looked and how tight it was. As a child, Eddie had carried around a placebo inhaler for his anxiety, because his mother had declared it was asthma. It was the 1960s, no one expected her to give him proper medication, and he wasn't even sure whether or not anxiety treatments were common at all back then. So, she made him depend on the little plastic object and the fake medicine in it instead. He replaced it with cigarettes in high school.

He looked at himself in the mirror. *Alright.* If there was one thing he could count on when everything else about his life bothered him, was his looks. He was very pleased with the way he looked most of the time. He worked out, he used skincare products, he dressed well, he took care of himself and he liked to see it pay off.

He did a quick run through in his brain to see if he was forgetting something. *All set.*

The walk from the elevator to the bar where Richie was waiting for him was enough to get him sweating. *Anxiety or anticipation? Both, probably*. Eddie scanned the bar, the tables, the whole room. Richie was nowhere to be found and then, that feeling began creeping up inside him. *He left. He took the money and he left.* Eddie's eyes skimmed the room once more and then, from his peripheral vision he saw him. *Holy sh-*

Richie looked like a completely different person. His hair was done, but there was no product on it, Eddie could tell. It looked soft; he could practically feel it between his fingers if he closed his eyes. He realized he hadn't actually touched Richie's natural hair, besides brushing it aside in the bathroom that morning. However, it had been wet then, and that was a whole different experience from what Richie's soft hair probably felt like.

Richie finally noticed him from across the room. He was sitting at the bar, whiskey or bourbon in his glass, with two rocks. He raised his glass at Eddie and smiled. He looked shy, but the sharpness of the suit helped cover it up slightly. He was hunching his shoulders slightly, something Eddie noticed he did when he walked into the dining area in the morning. He wanted to tip his chin upwards and trace his jaw, like he had done the night before.

Richie stood up from the bar, having paid for his drink and tipped the barman, and walked towards Eddie with his hands in his pockets. Eddie motioned with his finger for Richie to give a little twirl and, of course, like the good employee he was, Richie obliged.

"So?" Richie raised his eyebrows.

Eddie resisted the urge to touch his shoulders. If he had to be fully honest with himself, he was resisting the urge to do a lot of things in that moment, starting with cancelling that dinner and dragging Richie upstairs. After years of hating men in suits, he was converted by navy tweed. Sure, he was blaming the fabric, the cut of the suit, the way the colour brought out Richie's blue eyes. Fuck it, he was paying for this, he had every right to look.

"Good." He settled on that as his answer.

"I feel awkward but anything for you I guess."

Eddie's entire body felt hot. "No tie, I see."

"The pocket-square is cute though." Richie looked down and pouted.

Fuck. "I've never heard a pocket square be referred to as cute before."

"There's always a first time for everything, Mr. Kaspbrak."

It seems you're an expert in giving people firsts. "Let's go. The car is waiting for us."

"Oh, you're not-"

"Driving? Of course not. The hotel has a chauffeur service and I tend to take advantage of it."

Richie nodded and walked beside Eddie. He could still feel the eyes on him, on Eddie, on *them*. The gaze felt different now. It still made Richie want to curl into a ball and die, but for completely opposite reasons. The people were looking in curiosity, not disgust.

They were only a few feet from the car when, "What's your last name?" The question came out of nowhere.

"Oh. Tozier." Richie replied.

"Mr. Kaspbrak." The chauffeur greeted with a slight head nod, the staple for greeting Eddie it seemed.

"Good evening, Cole. Having a good day?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is Mr. Tozier, he's accompanying me to dinner."

Cole gave Richie a nod as well and Richie had to fight every instinct in his body that told him that was the funniest thing he had ever seen in his life. He was kicked out of a store and got a head bow, on the same day. The difference? Edward Kaspbrak at his side and expensive tweed.

--

Stan Uris was not a nervous man. He was a man who cared for his legacy, for the company his grandfather left him, and for the message it sent to his family that he was about to lose it all. Taken right from

under his feet. His wife, Patty, laced their fingers together and fixed the back of his suit jacket with her free hand.

“Don't let him corner you." Patty said.

"I know." He exhaled heavily.

"He will try to make you feel like there is no other option. That this is the only way to protect our people." Their employees, whose lives depended on the company and the security of their jobs and paychecks. "Don't let him."

"I heard he's an asshole."

"So did I." She took another deep breath. "Is he bringing that awful lawyer of his? I heard him speak to you on the phone."

"No, I was assured this was a friendly dinner. Not sure what about this deal seems friendly to Kaspbrak, but-"

"Honey, I think that's them?" She squeezed his hand for support and then let go, so the handshakes could begin.

"Mr. Uris." Eddie greeted, offering his hand.

"Mr. Kaspbrak." Stan took his hand and shook it firmly. A message being let on. "This is my wife, Patricia." He introduced and she stood up to meet Eddie's hand with hers.

"Mr. Kaspbrak, nice to finally meet you."

"Likewise, Mrs. Uris." He took her hand and held it gently, shaking it. "This is Mr. Tozier."

"Please, God, call me Richie, Mr. Tozier still freaks me out."

"Still?" Patty offered him a kind smile, as if she knew he needed some reassurance.

Richie leaned in as if to tell a secret. "I seem to only be called Mr. Tozier when Edward is next to me, but I don't take it personally."

Eddie smiled against his better judgement and the four of them sat. The waiter was quick to arrive at their table and Richie wondered if he had been watching them greet each other, waiting for his opening to welcome them and introduce the entrée menu.

Richie hated small talk; it made his skin crawl. Now, he was right in the middle of it. He wondered if Eddie knew he admired his confidence; then, he wondered if Eddie's confidence was an act, something he put on when it was time for business. He wanted to be able to do that. He wanted to be confident, demand respect, look the part. So, he watched Eddie. He watched the way he would emphasize words to make a point, how his hand movements became more assertive and precise as the conversation went on, how the bite in his tongue was cutting.

His tone of voice didn't match his body. He looked relaxed. Staged, even. That was when Richie realized the long-term effects of being raised in the world Eddie was. His body was programmed to fit a role, even when the words coming out of his mouth aimed for blood. He was business through and through, Richie couldn't understand most of the conversation. Not because the language was out of his level of intelligence, but because he had stopped listening a while ago and he had no idea what this contract they spoke of was about. Uris was fucked, his company was about to go down the drain and Eddie wanted to buy him out and take it apart before his employees suffered the consequences of bankruptcy. That was the extent of Richie's knowledge.

"Mr. Uris, I don't think you should allow your pride to endanger the financial stability of these people you claim to care for."

"Mr. Kasp-" Stan began.

"How dare you?" His wife interrupted.

Eddie leaned back in his chair and Richie realized yet another thing. *Eddie underestimated this woman.*

"Mr. Kaspbrak, I am not going to sit here and watch you insult my husband and all the love he put into this company. I will not sit here and watch you speak of pride, as if you are not proud yourself.

Would you give away your company? Just like that? Or would you fight for it?"

"Honey." Stan called.

"No. We're leaving." She announced, grabbing her purse and rising from her chair.

Eddie remained seated and didn't speak a word. Stan stood up with a simple *Good evening, Edward* and followed his wife.

--

Eddie rubbed his face and loosened his tie as he sank onto the couch. He didn't know if Richie was quiet because he genuinely didn't know what to say or because he was secretly judging him for failing to get anything done on the deal. He was leaning more on the former. A part of him wanted to impress Richie; admitting that to himself was his own little hell. Richie sat next to him and folded his legs under himself. Eddie had been noticing several things about the younger man, but the one that bothered him most was how Richie always seemed to try to make himself smaller. He knew it made something within him hurt, he did not know why.

"You do that a lot, huh?" Eddie observed.

"Do what?" It was a whisper; like they were sharing secrets.

"You try to make yourself smaller. You fold your legs, hunch your shoulders, sleep curled in on yourself... It's cute, but I think it's a self-esteem thing."

Richie's mouth dropped slightly open and his cheeks flushed pink. Then, he suddenly looked sad, and the hurt inside Eddie crept back up. He didn't want to place it.

"I don't mean to upset you, it's just-" Eddie exhaled. He looked up, then at Richie. His hand landed on Richie's knee. He knew a lot about

overcompensation, in his 41 years of life, he had become well-versed in the art. About this, Richie's attempts at disappearance, he knew nothing. He couldn't see why anyone would want that. "You shouldn't try to physically make yourself less...imposing." He watched for Richie's reaction, but Richie's eyes were locked on the fold of his knee, where Eddie's palm met his skin. Eddie pulled his hand away and lifted Richie's chin. "You have a big personality and you're tall and bubbly and-" *Bubbly?* "And funny." He smiled; it came naturally, a reaction to being around Richie. "You shouldn't try to make yourself disappear. You shouldn't-"

"Thank you.", was all Richie managed to say.

Eddie let go of him and stood up. "I'm going downstairs, okay?"

Richie clenched his jaw and Eddie's stomach turned on reflex. "Is everything alright?"

Eddie nodded and finished removing his tie, throwing it on the couch. "You don't have to worry about me."

Richie smiled shyly and swallowed. "And you don't have to worry about me, but that didn't stop you from giving me a speech on the importance of self-esteem."

Eddie smiled wide. "Yeah, I suppose you're right. Watch TV, order yourself something to eat, if you want."

Richie nodded and remained seated until the door closed behind Eddie. He unfolded his legs and spread them on the couch. You try to make yourself smaller. The words echoed in his head. Eddie was right, but that didn't mean Richie had to admit it or even acknowledge it. He didn't think it had anything to do with his self-esteem, or lack thereof, like Eddie had suggested.

When you're a gay kid in rural Maine, "being invisible" isn't about self-esteem; it's survival. Maine had been a crash course. Richie got beat up more times than he could remember. So, yes, maybe he made himself look small. Maybe he didn't want to be imposing. Why was that a problem? Why would that be a reason for concern? Eddie was leaving in a few days and Richie would carry on being a sex worker,

a gay sex worker at that. He would carry on being watched, questioned by police every few days, suspicious of every new client. He spent his life on alert. He couldn't afford to be confident and imposing in public. Eddie didn't know what it was like and he never would.

Richie walked to the bedroom area and removed his suit, folding it neatly on the mattress. Eddie had been gone for a while, but he tried to not think about it. His shoulders and neck hurt, and he craved a shower so bad, he could almost feel the water relaxing his muscles already. He dragged his feet across the length of the room and walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him and turning on the shower so the water could heat.

The bruise on his arm wasn't that bad, he had seen and gotten worse, but it was noticeable, nevertheless. He pressed his fingers into the skin of his forearm and hissed. *Fuck.* The steam was coming from the shower and he sighed with relief. He stepped inside and under the stream, pulling the shower doors closed.

--

Playing never failed to relax him. Forcing him to take lessons and stick with them had been the only good thing his mother had done his whole life. It soothed his need for control and organization to be able to sit at the keyboard and play the notes exactly like the music sheet instructed and to hear the music as it was intended, knowing it was him playing it. They were his fingers on the keys; he had the power to change the tempo and melody, to turn it into a completely different song if he wanted to. He never did, but he liked knowing he could.

Once he became good enough to play the more complex Sonatas, he started enjoying it and it stopped being something he was forced to do every evening, after school. His teacher had been quite impressed with him, even calling him a natural, and so his mother reminded him he would never have gotten good if she hadn't paid for private

lessons. It was technically true, but fuck her for saying that to him, he was 9 and proud of something for the first time in his life.

His fingers danced naturally on the keys, playing Eddie's favourite Sonata by muscle memory, and Eddie allowed himself to close his eyes and feel the music - he had a hard time relaxing and allowing himself to enjoy things, even as a 41 year old man. Sonia had left him a significant amount of emotional issues. He tried not to think about her and of his childhood, but it was hard when he played, with so many of his memories being associated with it.

He was right at the beginning of the 2nd Movement in the Sonata, the Allegretto, when he saw Richie from the corner of his eye. He was in his robe, his hair still a bit damp from what Eddie assumed was the shower. He stood under the doorframe; his arms crossed loosely over his torso. Eddie was now on the 3rd Movement, the Presto Agitato, the fastest section of the song, and his fingers flew from key to key with ease.

He looked at Richie again and his eyes landed on his chest, the dip between his pectoral muscles and the hair that grew there. If he had to guess, he would say Richie shaved his chest regularly and this was the result of a couple days of growth. That being said, Richie was probably naturally hairy (and his arms were a clear sign of this). Again, something in Eddie hurt, yearned.

Now, Eddie was a proud man, and his sexual performance from the night before? A total sham. He was set on redemption. With the song coming to an end, Eddie let his hands fall onto his lap, but he didn't dare look up. There were several men in the salon with him, hotel staff who had stayed behind listening to his playing. It wasn't uncommon for this to happen whenever he stayed at the Beverly.

Richie stepped further into the salon and Eddie turned on the seat so he could face him. “Gentleman, could you leave us, please?”

At his request, all the men stood up and walked across the salon quietly, acknowledging Richie with a head nod and closing the doors behind them as they left.

"Be honest, do you get off on that shit?" Richie pointed towards the

door with his thumb, his arm bent at the elbow.

Eddie chuckled and Richie couldn't stand him. "Do people always do what you tell them?"

"Not always." He blinked slowly, his eyes looking even bigger.

The lights were very dim in the salon, but Richie could see more than enough. He could see the veins on Eddie's hands and forearms, disappearing under his shirt right at the elbow, where his sleeves were rolled up. He could see how big his pupils were, the sweat on his forehead from playing, the tightness on his shoulders, … Richie could see *him*.

He was now standing only a foot away from the piano bench. He reached forward and touched Eddie's cheek with the tips of his fingers, being immediately pulled closer by Eddie gripping his robe belt. Richie held Eddie's face between his hands and the older man leaned his forehead against Richie's lower stomach.

He ran his fingers through his hair and held him there for a little while, feeling his shoulders relax a bit. Eddie leaned away from Richie and stood up, bringing their faces closer together. He brushed Richie's jaw with the tip of his nose and Richie leaned his head back a little, just enough to expose his neck and give Eddie what he was looking for.

But Eddie didn't bite him or suck on his skin, like Richie thought. No. He kissed from his collarbone, up his neck, on his jaw line and landed behind his ear. All the hairs on Richie's body stood up. He could feel how red he was, he knew he was blushing. It just wasn't what he was normally paid for. Gentle touches were not the norm. He almost didn't want to shut down.

Eddie undid the belt on Richie's robe and opened it. His hands were hastily on Richie's abdomen and travelling up his torso and his chest, then back down again to feel his sides. He shivered a little when Eddie's fingers brushed against his ribs and Eddie smiled when he noticed it.

"Eddie-" Richie was worried about someone walking in, but he was

stopped by Eddie's hand clasping over his mouth. Richie's worries went out of his body when Eddie wrapped an arm around him and lifted him up with ease to sit him on the piano top. "Oh."

Eddie looked at Richie. He looked dazed. He wanted to kiss him, he wanted to kiss him a lot, but Richie had said very clearly that that was the one thing he didn't do, so Eddie wouldn't try to. He had the rest of his body to kiss and that would have to suffice. Strange, because Eddie had never shown any interest in kissing anyone.

Richie never allowed himself to enjoy sex with a client, because he sucked at compartmentalising and separating his job from his feelings. He knew what he was like with men, he had been the same way when he was younger. He would be vulnerable with them, suck their dick and end up falling in love and expecting them to reciprocate, which they never did. But he was Richie, and in true Richie fashion, he never blamed them, never judged them. He knew what timeline they lived in. Maybe in a different decade, or a different city or country, men loving men would be something accepted and celebrated. This was not that timeline. And Richie understood fear. Survival, once again.

So, that was why he didn't kiss on the mouth. Eddie had mocked him the night before for it, but Richie gave in too much of himself on several occasions. He wanted to keep one thing for himself, just in case one day he met his prince. Right now, however, Richie could swear it looked like Eddie wanted to kiss him, even if it was a fleeting thought that lasted two seconds. He saw it in the way Eddie stared at his lips and then at his eyes.

Eddie was standing between his legs when he reached for his shoulders and rolled the robe off of him. Richie closed his eyes and exhaled. If nothing else came out of that, at least he felt safe under Eddie's touch. He had been scared too many times.

Eddie kissed his neck again as his hand travelled down Richie's stomach and landed on his dick, over the fabric of his boxers. Richie inhaled at the faint touch.

"Is this okay?" Eddie asked. The words vibrated against Richie's neck and a chill ran down his spine.

"Yeah, man, anything." Richie replied and immediately regretted his wording. "I mean- Yes, Eddie. Keep going, please."

He felt Eddie's smile in the same beat as he felt his teeth sink into his skin. Richie's hands instinctively searched for Eddie's body, and he hooked his fingers over and inside the hem of his pants. *Well, this is an improvement from last night.*

Eddie played with the hem of Richie's underwear; the latter undid his leather belt and zipper, letting his pants drop to his ankles. Richie had a vision of himself using his own belt as a whip on Mike two nights before, but quickly hushed that image away.

Eddie pulled Richie's boxers half off with his left hand and spat on his right. Richie was immediately hard. Eddie seemed to be focusing on Richie's pleasure rather than his own, which was (again) now how these things usually went. Richie wondered if he was making up for the night before, but the thought was too much to handle when Eddie's hand wrapped around his shaft and squeezed.

Richie's mouth filled with water and he felt grateful, as he spat it into his hand and pulled Eddie's underwear down to his mid thighs. He rubbed the tip of Eddie's dick with his thumb and almost collapsed at how wet it was, already dripping.

Eddie was jerking him off slow, it was torturous. "Don't stop." He moaned into Eddie's ear, his face nuzzling his neck.

Richie was pumping Eddie's dick in return, slightly faster and sloppier. Eddie's pre-cum made the sliding of Richie's hand easier, but a lot messier too. Eddie wasn't complaining though. In fact, the sounds coming out of him were everything, except complaints. Richie felt crazy. *Don't take me away, don't take me away, let me feel this, let me have this,* he begged his own mind, struggling to stay in control of his consciousness. "Eddie-", he moaned, "Faster."

Eddie shook his head. *No*. And leaned forward to plant a kiss on Richie's forehead. Richie decided, in that moment, that Edward Kaspbrak, CEO, was the king of hand-jobs. Richie let out a noise he had never heard himself make before. A whine. It was a whine.

Eddie started fucking into his hand. Richie isn't sure at what point, but he did. So, Richie tightened the grip around him, and Eddie grabbed a fist full of his hair and pulled. Eddie's lips were swollen, and Richie realized he must have been biting them that entire time.

Eddie came all over Richie's hand and a little on his thigh, with one last frantic thrust. His hold on Richie's cock persevered, which meant Richie barely grasped anything about Eddie's orgasm. Eddie had him (literally) in the palm of his hand. Richie would have let him do whatever he wanted to him, in that moment. That would have normally frightened him, but he kept surprising himself.

Richie didn't know *how* Eddie did that with his hand, but he knew he didn't want him to stop. He could feel his orgasm coming, and his hips started to involuntarily buck up. Eddie placed his free hand on Richie's thigh and pushed him down on the piano. Richie wrapped his arms around Eddie and hid his face in his neck. He came in pained moans and Eddie kept stroking him through it, squeezing a few times and letting go, making sure Richie's dick spilled out fully. His shirt was definitely going straight to the trash.

They stayed still for a while, Richie still wrapped around him, waiting for their breaths to even out and their hearts to steady. In the end, Eddie was the first to establish eye contact. He brushed Richie's now fully dry hair away from his forehead, with feathery touches on his skin. Richie was tingling all over, certain his legs would buckle if he attempted to walk. He curled and uncurled his toes a few times and smiled when his eyes met Eddie's.

"Are you hungry?" Eddie helped Richie back into his bathrobe, before pulling his own pants up.

"A little now."

"Come on, we can order room service." He held Richie's hand and helped him off the piano.

"We definitely could have broken that."

Eddie shrugged.

“Oh, of course, you would just buy them an even more expensive one.”

Eddie laughed. “Well… Yeah, probably.”

“Money really means you can do whatever you want doesn’t it?”

“Most of the time.”

“Did you grow up with money? Or did you work for this?”

“Both.”

Richie squinted. “Mm. Intrigued.”

“I’ll tell you another day.”

And he would.

--

Richie was a peaceful sleeper compared to him. Eddie had always been a blanket hogger, and he would move around so much in his sleep that the sheets would always be untucked in the morning. He almost didn't want to get under the covers, afraid to disturb the man already sleeping in their b- His. His bed. The night before he hadn't thought much about it, he had been too tired and upset with himself. Tonight, however, he felt loose, happy, for the first time in a very long time. Richie was responsible for it, Eddie wouldn't even attempt to deny that, not tonight at least. It had felt too good and he was determined to allow himself nice things.

Richie shifted in his sleep and sunk further onto his pillow, his hair sticking out in all directions. Eddie caught his smile as it was forming; that too he decided to allow. He pulled back the covers and stopped dead in his tracks. Richie's arm was bruised. *What the fu-* He almost rushed to shake him awake but stopped himself. *It looks like-* They were fingers, he realised. Three bruises of similar sizes, on

Richie's forearm. They were fingers, someone grabbed him. Someone, at some point that day, had grabbed him. Hard. A significant amount of force had to be put into that grip for that to happen.

Eddie felt hot. It had to have happened when Richie went out shopping. He felt guilty. Richie had gone out because Eddie has asked him. *I seem to only be called Mr. Tozier when Edward is next to me*. Eddie recalled Richie's answer to Patricia Uris and tried to place his facial expression, but he hadn't been looking at him.

Again, the pain in his chest made itself known. It was becoming a nuisance and happening too often. He wanted to hold Richie in his arms but knew he couldn't. He decided to get in bed, and he would bring it up the next morning. He was already prepared for Richie to deflect and make some sort of excuse for that kind of behaviour.

Eddie slid into bed and pulled the covers slowly over him. Richie didn't move. He turned on his side so he could look at him. Richie was lying on his back, but his head was turned on its side, facing Eddie. His hair was a mess and Eddie discovered he liked it like that. He had finally gotten the chance to stick his fingers in it at the salon and it was softer than he imagined.

Richie had a well-groomed stubble and it only enhanced his bone definition, making him look slightly older than he probably was. The patch of skin on his neck where Eddie had bit him was still red, but Eddie was fairly certain it wasn't going to be there the next morning. He wasn't interested in marking Richie up, unless he asked him to. Fuck, he wanted him to ask.

Eddie was so caught up in his thoughts, he didn't notice his hand reaching over to Richie. He traces his forearm with his fingers, over the bruising. Richie opened his eyes and found Eddie staring back at him. Eddie pulled away like Richie's skin had burned him. "I'm sorry." He whispered.

"It's okay." Richie whispered back, only half-awake. He rolled over and lied on his stomach, but he was still facing Eddie. "Can't sleep?"

"I only just lied down, actually."

"What were you doing?" Richie's voice was deeper, less nasally, when he wanted to be quieter.

"I was reading the contract again." Eddie confessed.

Richie closed his eyes and got comfy. "You work too much, love." And he was fast asleep again.

Eddie didn't answer. He didn't want to answer. So, he let himself fall asleep too, to the sound of that word echoing in his brain. *Love.*

Notes for the Chapter:

You can find me on twitter HERE

Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hi, everyone!
> Thanks again for coming back.
>
> Here are some warnings:
> - Sexual content more on the graphic side (fully consensual)
> - Instance of sexual assault (unwanted touching; not too graphic; connor/richie; richie freezes)
> - Emetophobia warning
> - Self-blaming discourse on Richie's part for the assault (self-hate; disgust with himself)
>
> And I think that's it! Please check notes at the end for a link to some fanart my friend did!

His second time waking up next to Richie felt different. He was still sleeping peacefully next to him, body curled on itself. He didn't want to get up, but he had a job he needed to go to. He ran his fingers through Richie's hair, smiling when a content little noise escaped his lips. He opened his eyes, eyelids still heavy, and the smile on his lips was so content and honest, that Eddie felt his heart speed up.

"Hi…" Richie whispered.

"Good morning."

Eddie hadn't realized, but his fingers were still in Richie's hair, scratching his scalp and playing with the strands in gentle pulls. Richie closed his eyes. Eddie let go.

"Did you sleep well?" Richie asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I really did."

Richie rubbed his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them to look at Eddie, he found that the man was already watching him, a concerned look on his face. "What's wrong?"

Richie looked so scared, and Eddie softened his expression. He couldn't stand that look in Richie's eyes, the way his lips became a tight line. Richie was usually always smiling. He held his face in his hand, his palm warm against Richie's soft cheek. "Nothing, nothing is wrong, just-" His gaze went towards the bruise on Richie's arm, giving away his thoughts.

Richie covered the bruise with his hand. He looked embarrassed and that angered Eddie; there was nothing to be embarrassed about. "It's nothing, Eddie."

The nickname rang warm and sweet in Eddie's ears. He loved it because it was Richie. No one else could have it, no one else could call him that. "Don't. Richie, don't. Who did that?"

“They just- um, they kicked me out. Which is understandable? I was-dressed like-"

Eddie pressed two fingers to his lips, so tenderly Richie almost gave up and cried. “Did they call you names?”

Richie didn't respond, but the way he tensed up at the question was enough. Eddie forced out a breath through his nose and Richie wanted to ask him why he cared so much – or at all. He didn't ask.

“What did they call you?” Eddie pressed.

“Nothing, it was implied. It’s fine, I’m used to it, so...” He excused.

Eddie's eyes got heavy with something Richie couldn't place or didn't want to. He blinked once, twice, and tightened his lips together. “Yeah.” Eddie softened, leaving feather-like touches with his fingertips along Richie’s jaw. “But you shouldn’t have to be.”

"It's only a bruise. He grabbed a little too hard, he probably didn't mean to-"

"Richie." Eddie's face was stone-like.

"Please, please, don't be mad." Richie looked down, shaking a little.

Eddie raised his hand to pull him closer, but Richie flinched at the

movement. Eddie's stomach turned cold. "I hate-" Richie's eyes shot up towards him. "-everyone who has ever landed a hand on you, Richie." He moved his arm slowly, wrapping it around Richie's shoulders, so he could pull him against his bare chest. He could feel Richie's breath hitch. "I'm not mad, Richie. Not at you."

Richie exhaled, his breath coming out shaky. Eddie kissed the top of his head and drew circles on his back. "You know what? I have an idea."

--

Richie walked next to Eddie, trying to ignore the tight grip on his hand and their interlocked fingers. Richie still hated being stared at, even if the eyes watching him were less judging of his clothes, and more judging of the nature of their relationship. Eddie, however, appeared to be unfazed. Richie wondered if he was paying attention to their surroundings, just in case anyone he knew showed up in front of them and he had to pretend to not have had his dick in Richie's hand the night before.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea, Eddie…"

"These people don't care about your occupation or sexuality, Richie. They care about credit cards and whether there's a limit on them."

"What if they-"

Eddie let go of his hand and opened the door to one of the stores motioning at him to go inside. They had barely taken two steps past the threshold, when a man came over to them, with a wide smile that was bordering on creepy. Richie took a step back, but Eddie tightened his hold on his hand and pulled him closer again.

"Gentlemen, welcome. How may I assist you today?"

Eddie let go of Richie's hand, who only then noticed how fast his heart had been beating that entire time. He was in the middle of

taking a deep breath to calm his anxiety when Eddie lay his hand flat at the bottom of his back. His stomach did a backflip.

"I want you-", Eddie poked the man's chest with his index finger, "-to find this handsome young man some clothes worthy of him." His smile turned into a frown and he leaned in closer to the store employee. "I am ready to spend an obscene, very dirty, filthy amount of money here today, and I will require some major, and I mean major, sucking up, Mr.-" He squinted while he read the man's name tag. "-Finley."

The man gulped and Richie thought he was gonna choke from trying not to laugh, and from how badly he wanted to drop to his knees in front of Eddie's dick.

"Of course, Mr.-"

"Kaspbrak." Eddie pointed to himself. "And Tozier." He wrapped his arm around Richie's waist. It was Richie's turn to gulp.

The store manager - Richie assumed he was the manager - turned around and called over the two young women who had been sitting and watching from the back wall.

"Are you trying to make it obvious we're gay, or?" Richie asked between gritted teeth.

Eddie smiled, but didn't reply.

Mr. Finley reappeared with a tea set and the two girls, Ashley and Mary, surrounded Richie with catalogues and several pieces of clothing. Richie felt overwhelmed and he searched Eddie's eyes for comfort. He was sitting on a fancy armchair that looked more like a throne, with his legs crossed, a magazine resting on his knee and a teacup in his hand, that he took small sips from. He looked up and found Richie looking shy, his shoulders hunched as usual and his eyes a little dazed, so he smiled and winked at him. He did not appear soothed by it at all since his cheeks turned bright red, but, oh boy, Eddie was amused. Eddie was obsessed, wanting to see how red he could make Richie go just by looking at him. *Best three thousand dollars I've ever spent.*

"How are we feeling, Mr. Kaspbrak?" Mr. Finley asked, slightly invading his space.

Eddie squinted and looked the man up and down. He took the hint and stepped back.

"I think some more sucking up is needed."

Mr. Finley started opening his mouth but was immediately shut down.

"Not me, Finley, him!" He almost shouted.

The manager squirmed away and over to Richie and the two girls. Eddie stayed around a while longer, just until Richie had visibly relaxed.

"You're doing great." Richie blushed again and Eddie didn't resist brushing the hair on his forehead. "Here's my card and here's the office number, in case you have any issues using it. Just relax, okay? Have fun. You look beautiful."

Richie was still hunching, but at least he was smiling now, and Richie's smile was enough for Eddie. He kissed his forehead for good measure and left for work.

--

When Richie walked across the hotel lobby accompanied by three young men carrying his bags of clothes, the stares didn't bother him. People were stepping to the side so he could walk through, when normally they'd be right in his way, turning their noses at him. He felt it was all a bit stupid. They treated him in polar opposite ways from when he had first walked the lobby during the day, on his first morning at the Beverly. The stores were even worse. No one dared raise their voices at him, let alone consider bruising him for looking through hangers. All because he was dressed in a stupid white shirt and a pair of slacks.

He thought it was Eddie's presence that warranted respect from people, but when he walked into the second store alone, carrying expensive brand bags and holding a credit card, he found that to not be the case. It was the money people responded to. He tried, as an experiment, to test this by bringing up a fake boyfriend, and to his surprise the people smiled and nodded in agreement, even mentioning their own straight partners. Eddie had been right - a credit card with no limit on it could get you anything no matter what you did - or who you did.

Richie liked being treated well, and he certainly liked the new clothes, but he hated what it meant. It meant that money meant more than humanity. It meant that kindness and honesty stood below social status in society's eyes. He needed a shower and a nap after spending a whole morning feeling like a class traitor. It was the principle of the thing.

--

Connor leaned back on the chair and laced his fingers behind his head.

"I feel your fucking eyes staring at me, Connor." Eddie fiddled with a Rubik’s cube.

"It's not like you to be late, especially after fucking up dinner with a major client."

"Is that what Uris is? A client? Thought he was prey."

"Fuck off, Edward."

"No."

"Why were you late?"

"We've had a day full of meetings, is this what you've been thinking about the whole time?"

"I'd just like an explana-"

"Since when do I owe you explanations?" Eddie interrupted. It had been a long day; he wasn't in the mood.

Connor sighed and stood up from his chair, walking over to the big glass windows which covered the entire wall of the conference room and overlooked Los Angeles. It was dark out, but the city was always most beautiful at night. "Fine. Is Myra coming to the polo match tomorrow?"

"Nope." Eddie popped the P on purpose and twirled the cube in his hands.

"Are you fucking with me this week? Seriously, are you doing this just to piss me off?"

"Why is my fiancée's presence so crucial?"

"For the exact reason that she is your fiancée! People are gonna talk."

"She has a life, why would I make her travel across country for business?" Eddie set down the cube and crossed his arms over his chest. "Richie is going with me."

Connor squinted. "Who the fuck is Richie?"

"The friend who went with me to dinner. Uris and his wife are gonna be there and they already know him, so."

"Jesus, are you fucking this guy?"

Eddie leaned back and picked up the cube again. He didn't answer.

"You're a moron, you can't bring your gay mistress to this."

"Oh, but I can."

Connor rubbed his face and spoke into his hands, his voice coming out muffled. "Why are you like this?"

"Gay?" Eddie laughed.

"No! Stupid!" Connor yelled. "I'm going back to the hotel. God, Edward, you better not fuck up this deal for me." Connor grabbed his jacket and briefcase and stormed off.

Eddie stayed in his chair, the realization hitting him like a brick to the face – that was the first time he had said he was gay out loud. It felt good, he thought. He had said it to himself before, in his thoughts, but never out loud, never with words, never at someone. He watched the cube as he spun it around in his hands.

He had walked around Rodeo Drive that morning with Richie's hand in his and it hadn't felt foreign or wrong, like he always guessed it would, and like it had in college, behind closed doors, in his dorm room bed after sex. He had touched Richie, called him beautiful and kissed his forehead in front of people, and nothing bad at happened. No storm broke out, no lightning struck him, his life didn't end. It had been in front of total strangers, but- Eddie would grab on to any crumb of hope he could get that maybe, one day, men like him could be happy. Fuck, maybe he could be happy. Maybe he could be strong and come out and leave Myra and- He inhaled so sharply the cold hurt his sinuses. *Don't get ahead of yourself, Edward.* He finished the red side, but, as always, to solve another side he would have to take the red apart.

He wondered if Richie was okay. After he left for work, he kept thinking about the bruising on his arm and regretting not having stayed with him. If Richie showed up with another one, or worse, Eddie would never forgive himself for making him shop alone for the second time.

He didn't understand why he cared, why he had such a visceral instinct to protect him, why he hadn't been able to resist him since he sat next to him in Connor's god-awful car. It was beyond sex and the fact that Eddie knew that was terrifying to him, because 1) it had only been one day and two nights; and 2) it would end soon. It was like Richie had found a manual titled "How to make Eddie Kaspbrak tick" and memorized it. The yellow and green were taken apart again.

Richie had dreamy eyes, a light shade of blue that had already begun to haunt Eddie's dreams, and Eddie wanted to be able to see the world through them; he had a feeling Richie could see things he

would never even think to notice or look for. His laugh was the most beautiful sound, and he found Eddie funny and he couldn't believe it because no one ever thought he was funny; he was boring, stiff, angry, not funny, but he made Richie laugh and wasn't that just a wonderful little thing?

Richie had woken up that morning with the most vulnerable expression Eddie had ever seen and he had let Eddie play with this hair. He hadn't moved or refused Eddie's touch. Eddie liked that, he liked touching Richie, he liked watching Richie, he liked sharing a bed with him, and having sex with him, and- Fuck, he wanted to kiss him so badly. He couldn't, he wouldn't, but he wanted to. Four out of the six sides of the cube were done.

You have to stop. It has to stop. "He's your employee, nothing else." Eddie sighed and looked at his wristwatch. Richie was probably waiting for him back at the penthouse, maybe even worried, Eddie found himself hoping. It was kind of embarrassing to think about how much he wanted Richie to care for him the same way he cared for Richie.

The cube was solved. Eddie sat up and stared at it for a little while, before placing it on the conference room table. With a deep sigh, he stood up, threw his overcoat over his shoulders, grabbed his things and left the office.

--

The penthouse door opened and closed again. Richie could hear Eddie walk in and set down his briefcase, before pacing around for a few seconds. Eddie was looking for him and Richie's heartbeat went rogue at the thought. Richie was in the tub, his body fully submerged in the water. He sat up straight and shivered at the contact between his back and the porcelain. The candles spread around the bathroom instantly felt like a very bad idea, as Eddie's footsteps sounded closer.

"Richie?" Eddie called out, peeking into the bathroom. When his eyes

found him, he looked surprised, then he scanned the scenery, saw the candles and the bubble bath and smiled. "Hi, what uh- what are you doing?"

Richie splashed some water around. "I was waiting for you."

The honest reply seemed to bitch-slap Eddie in the face, because he blinked a few times and swallowed. "Oh."

Richie laughed a little, shoulders dancing up and down and continuing to play with the water.

"Really?" Eddie smiled and walked into the bathroom, letting the door close to prevent drafts. Or he told himself it was to prevent drafts. He walked over to the side of the tub. Richie leaned away from it and shifted his position, so he could touch Eddie. His hands were dripping wet, but he didn't care and, from the look on Eddie's face when Richie touched his stomach over the shirt, neither did Eddie.

"How was work?"

Myra would always ask him that when he came home to their shared New York condo, but those times never came with him losing his shirt. "Stressful." He said, looking down at where Richie's fingers fumbled slowly with the buttons, turning the shirt more and more see-through as he did it. Eddie helped by unbuttoning the top buttons Richie couldn't reach from his sitting position. He rolled the shirt off his shoulders and felt it land crumpled on the floor, immediately letting his head fall back when Richie started covering his lower abdomen with warm wet kisses. He let out a teasing and small laugh when Richie nipped the sides of his stomach.

"Do you wanna take these off so you don't ruin another suit?" Richie asked, already a little dazed. He pulled apart Eddie's belt and zipper and waited as he pulled them off and kicked them to the other side of the bathroom along with his underwear.

Richie didn't understand why he wanted Eddie so much that night. If he had to guess, he would say the night before had felt real to him for the first time in a long time, after going through hundreds of

clients in semi-consciousness, and Richie wanted to have that feeling again, to enjoy it while he still could. He had never been touched like that; it was natural to want to hold on to it. Right? Nothing else.

Eddie gasped when Richie sucked one of his balls into his mouth and gripped his hips to pull him closer. Eddie's brain liquefied and his fingers went automatically to Richie's hair. Richie looked up at him and didn't break eye contact when he licked from the base of Eddie's dick to the tip, closing his mouth around the head and twirling his tongue. Eddie took a shaky breath through his mouth and fisted Richie's hair, pulling.

"Rich-"

He was interrupted by Richie bopping his head forward and his cock hitting the back of his throat. Richie was going to gag if he didn't slow down, but he didn't seem concerned with it. Eddie held Richie's bopping head in his hands and got a hold of himself, so he wouldn't fuck into his mouth. If Richie kept this rhythm going, Eddie wouldn't last very long.

He brushed Richie's wet hair back and ran his thumb on his forehead. "Fuck." He moaned. He was so worked up he didn't even pay attention to the pain in his knees and the strain this position was putting on his thighs.

Richie looked up again and appeared to be smiling. *Little shit.* He hummed in a way of asking Eddie if it was good, but the vibration hit the tip of Eddie's dick, reducing the grown man to a whining mess. Eddie didn't usually lose his composure during sex, because he never allowed himself to get caught in a vulnerable situation. However, Richie's mouth on his dick was a too good feeling and a sight too gorgeous to waste with his own uptight ways and need for control. So, he let it happen. He let it happen when Richie pulled back and started jerking him off, he let it happen when Richie caught his precum in his fingers, he let it happen when Richie took his index finger and- *Oh. Oh!* Eddie had never done that. Years. Years of gay sex and he had never done that. Couldn't relinquish control long enough for it to happen.

Richie watched out for Eddie's body language, looking for any sign

telling him to stop. Instead, Eddie clenched around his finger and let go. Richie thrust it in and out a few times, before taking Eddie's dick in his mouth again, but only halfway this time. The two-way stimulation was new for Eddie, and he grunted his way through the build-up of his orgasm. "M-more." Was all he managed to get out that wasn't a noise. Richie let Eddie's dick rest in his mouth and pushed another finger past the rim. Eddie's chin touched his chest, and he felt his entire body shake.

Richie pulled Eddie closer and his knees hit the tub, causing him to grit his teeth. Richie widened his eyes as if to say *Oopsie* and he curled his fingers inside Eddie, thrusting harder and watching the man standing over him squirm and pull at his hair. Richie sucked Eddie's dick faster, spit hanging from his chin and dribbling down to his chest. Richie felt filthy and, fuck, he felt so fucking good.

"Ah, ah- Fuck- Richie, Richie, Richie-" He fucked into his mouth, losing control of his hips. Eddie was about to pull out, when Richie shook his head in a tantrum and sucked Eddie through his orgasm, swallowing his load down to the last drop, and sucking the tip for a while after, wanting to see what Edward Kaspbrak, CEO, looked like when he was fucked out and overstimulated.

Eddie tapped Richie's cheek and ran his fingers through his own hair, still catching his breath. Richie pulled back and splashed some of the bath water on his face, rubbing it as he cooled down as well. His erection was still very much present and needy, and the water was getting cold. Eddie touched his cheek, so he'd face him again.

"Step out, darling, let's run a new one."

"S'cold." Richie smiled as he got out of the tub, watching the water go down the drain as it emptied.

Eddie sat on the edge of it, and poured in some bath oil, adding some body wash for the foam. He let the tap run at half pressure and walked over to Richie. They were both fully naked, but it wasn't awkward, or uncomfortable. It was like they had always known each other, had always been this close. Eddie took his hand and walked him to the shower, closing the doors and letting the hot water run down both their backs, getting rid of Eddie's sweat build-up from the

day.

Richie's cock had already begun going soft when Eddie wrapped his fist around it and squeezed. Richie sighed in relief and his head hit the back wall of the shower with a thud. Eddie's palm laid flat on his chest and he looked up, searching for Richie's collarbones, neck, jaw, anything he could lick. He started to slowly jerk Richie off and Richie immediately became putty, hands touching Eddie everywhere they could reach, looking for any closeness he could get. He just wanted to touch him; he couldn't kiss him.

Eddie's hand found the back of Richie's neck and pulled him closer, kissing his neck and behind his ear. Richie was so hard it looked painful and Eddie could feel how badly he was shaking, aching to have that release. He was waiting for Eddie to let him have it and to Eddie that was just about the sexiest thing he had ever seen in his life. Richie started fucking into his hand and Eddie tightened his grip, holding him through his orgasm.

Richie hid his face in Eddie's neck and Eddie started playing with his hair and cooing at him - who the fuck was he becoming? "That's a good boy, Richie, come on. Let go, honey, it's okay. Let go for me. You're so fucking beautiful."

Richie spilled all over Eddie's hand and stomach, it being washed down the drain as quickly as it came out. He turned off the shower, still caressing the nape of Richie's neck and curling a long strand of dark brown hair around his index finger. He guided Richie through the bathroom floor carefully, so they wouldn't slip on the tiles. After turning off the tap, he motioned at Richie to get in the tub, then followed right after, laying with his back against Richie's chest.

The water was hot, but just under the point where it would be painful, and the scent from the bath oil filled the bathroom. Richie let his head rest on the porcelain like he had done before Eddie arrived from work and closed his eyes for a few seconds, enjoying the heat of the water and the feeling of having Eddie in his arms, touching him so openly. He felt almost taken care of. Richie wanted to take care of him too.

"Less stressed?" Richie whispered directly into Eddie's ear and felt his

spine curl on itself.

Eddie hummed from the back of his throat. He grabbed Richie's hands from his sides and guided them so that Richie's arms would wrap around his torso and hold him. Richie didn't stop at his arms, spreading his legs and wrapping them around Eddie's hips. He ran his fingers softly down Eddie's chest and abdomen, admiring how smooth and beautiful his skin was. He had freckles all over the place and Richie wanted to devour him. Again.

"Can you do me a favour?" Eddie asks seemingly out of nowhere.

"Of course." *That's a good boy, Richie,* he heard Eddie's voice say in his head. He blushed.

"Would you ask me something about myself?"

"You can just talk if you wanna talk, Eds, I'm all ears."

"What?"

"Hm?"

"What did you call me?"

Richie grinned obnoxiously. "Eds."

Eddie squinted. "Absolutely not."

"It's a nickname! It's cute!" Richie held Eddie tighter in his arms.

"You already gave me a nickname. One nickname is enough. We have a one nickname limit in this arrangement."

Richie started laughing hard, from his belly, and Eddie could feel him shaking against his body. He thought he should get an ECG once he got back to New York, because he was definitely arrhythmic. That's what it was.

Richie leaned back again and sighed. Eddie felt his chest rise and fall with it. "Mm... What was your childhood like?"

"Wow, going straight in, huh?"

"Nothing straight about it."

Eddie laughed and stayed for a minute just feeling Richie's body heat and heartbeat. Then he spoke. "It was...hard."

Richie seemed genuinely surprised by the answer, and he was really bad at faking it.

"You seem surprised."

"I'm not, just- I always assumed that-"

"No, don't get me wrong, it was a very, very comfortable, very privileged upbringing. That doesn't make it good, though."

"So, your family was-"

"Not the most...loving." He laced his fingers with Richie's, who in return started playing with his hair, running his fingers slowly through the scalp.

"Your mom? Dad?"

"Dad died when I was young, too young to remember anything about him. My mom was a pure-breed, high society New Yorker. She cared about her company and not much else, ya know?" Richie nodded and tightened his legs around Eddie. "And she never liked anything I did, gave me a serious case of imposter syndrome and self-doubt, I spent thousands in therapy." He laughed despite himself. "The only times I ever spoke to her for longer than two minutes were for her to scold me about doing something improper, or embarrassing her, or-" He sighed. "I don't know. She was all about-"

"Appearances?"

Eddie sighed, realizing he had fallen into the same hole as her. He knew that. He had known that for a while now. "Yeah. Like me, I know."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." He played with Richie's fingertips and felt an urge to kiss his knuckles; those strong hands had held on to his body and felt him shake in pleasure just moments before. His mother would have absolutely hated this. "So, I did the only thing I'm good at to fix the self-esteem issues she gave me."

"What was that?"

"I bought her company from bankruptcy and took it apart." He let go of Richie's hand.

Richie inhaled deeply and kissed Eddie's temple. He was gentle with it and he let his lips linger on Eddie's skin, for far longer than Bill would approve of. They went to bed not long after that and that night Eddie leaned his back against Richie's chest and tried not to think about how this would be over in a few days.

--

Eddie watched Richie struggle with his shoelaces for a few minutes before dropping to one knee in front of him and tying them. Richie took a quick breath and stared at the wall, not moving, not even when Eddie sat next to him and placed a calming hand on his knee.

"Are you okay?"

No. "Yes."

"It's just some networking, hm?"

I have a bad feeling about it. "I know." He faced Eddie and forced himself to smile. "I'm okay."

Eddie frowned. He could already tell when Richie wasn't being honest with him; he was almost always true. "Mm, alright." He traced his jaw and wondered what his lips tasted like. Richie was going to kill him. "We can be a little late if you need some time."

Richie smiled honestly that time. "I'm okay, let me just get the jacket."

"I like the sweater, by the way."

"Thank you, I did not pick it." He said feeling the cashmere. He hadn't even looked at the price tag. Richie grabbed a casual black tweed jacket and put it on. When he looked up, Eddie was staring. "What? It's cold!" Richie justified.

"Not that, just- Not the tweed again."

"You don't like it?"

"No, no. I like it.", he shamelessly eyed him up and down.

Richie shook his head and grinned. "Oh, my, Mr. Kaspbrak, please, *do not* keep your hands to yourself."

"You're a menace." Eddie put his own jacket on and held out his hand, letting Richie take it. "Come on, move."

--

Richie found himself craving Eddie's hand in his, holding him down and soothing him. It seemed to come naturally to Eddie to take care of Richie, or maybe that was wishful thinking on his part, that someone would ever naturally want to take care of him. He was always the one who took care of his friends, who cleaned their wounds, fed them when they were sick, bathed them when they were beaten or abused or bottomed out on drugs. Being taken care of wasn't something he knew. Maybe Eddie was like this with everyone and a part of Richie hoped that was the case, because the opposite was not something he felt he could handle. How would he walk away from this if Eddie told him he cared? If he told him he was special? If he asked him to stay?

He hated these people. He hated these people and he wanted to go

ho- to the penthouse, it's the penthouse. They scrunched their noses when Richie called him Eddie instead of Edward and pointed out his ankle bracelet in either shock or pure mockery, Richie hadn't decided yet. Eddie, on the other hand, seemed to be completely in his element and, despite not enjoying it himself, Richie found that he really (really) liked seeing Eddie smile and looking looser than he had been the night they met.

Richie also noticed that the way Eddie spoke of business now, his body language, was the entire opposite from what he had seen at dinner with Stan and Patricia Uris. He would move his hands a lot as he, quite frankly, ran his mouth and everyone in the circle would nod along, probably understanding even less than Richie did. Eddie was sweet and caring, and now he was proving himself to be passionate? *Oh, boy.*

"Hey." He put his hand on his chest and Richie felt compelled to slap it away because one, people would see, and two, if Eddie kept touching him like they were a fucking *couple*, Richie was going to jump off the penthouse balcony by the end of the week. "Are you hungry?"

"You keep trying to feed me."

"Yes? I- What? You have to eat." Eddie struggled.

"I'm just- Nevermind. Yes, I am. Feed me, Mr. Kaspbrak."

"You're so weird. I'll go get food. *Don't* run off." He did a little karate chop with his hand and Richie held up his arms in surrender.

"Okay, damn." But Richie walked off as Patricia Blum waved at him from afar. *Well, it would be rude to ignore her.*

A few yards away, "What the hell, man?"

Eddie jumped. "Fuck, Connor, don't fucking do that."

"Who is this guy?"

"What guy?" He faked confusion.

Connor poked him in the chest. "Don't get smart with me." He looked towards the field. "Richie, Richard, whatever his name is."

"He's a guy." Eddie sipped his red wine and pulled a face. *I hate Merlot.*

"Why is he cosying up to Uris's wife?"

"She has a name."

"Shut. The fuck. Up. Why are they chit chatting, look at that."

"You know, it's rude to point."

Connor stared at him in disbelief and shook his head. "You're killing me man. What if this guy is fucking you to get information, huh? What if he's with them? Where did you even find him? Corporate espionage is real, Edward, you can't just jump on a random guy's dick!" He was being loud, and Eddie knew it was on purpose. "What if he blackmails you and tries to out you? Huh? Do you ever think? Did he pick you up at a bar?"

Eddie, who had been listening to his little monologue, first annoyed, then thoroughly entertained, laid a hand on Connor's shoulder. "He's a prostitute, Connor." Connor's eyes widened. "I picked him up at Hollywood Boulevard. In *your car*."

Connor started laughing and Eddie rolled his eyes. "You're the only millionaire on earth who goes for a cheap whore. Are you that lonely?"

"Shut up." He said through gritted teeth.

"No, no, this is very fun for me. Thank you for this." He was still laughing when he walked away.

Eddie looked out to where Richie was standing talking to Patty. He looked happy, comfortable, and Eddie took a deep breath, relief hitting him. He never wanted to make Richie uncomfortable and he knew he hated the world Eddie was a part of, but Eddie had hired him for the purpose of accompanying him (mostly, the sex was just a bonus) so he shouldn't feel guilty for dragging Richie to events, right?

Still, maybe he should do something fun with him, something neither work nor sex related, something new that Richie had probably never gotten the chance to do before.

Patty seemed to find Richie funny, laughing out loud and throwing her head back. Richie was laughing as well, and Eddie recalled the night before in the tub, when he could feel Richie's entire body shake under Eddie's when he laughed. Richie looked in Eddie's direction and Eddie could pinpoint the moment his eyes found him, because Richie's shoulders relaxed. Visibly. *Fuck.* Richie waved enthusiastically with his arm fully stretched over his head. Eddie raised his glass at him and chuckled, unaware of who was watching him.

Richie lowered his arm and stood watching Eddie for a few more seconds until he turned around and walked off.

"Do you love him?"

The question punched Richie straight in the gut. When he turned to face her, Patty was smiling, a soft expression on her face. No judgement. *That's new.* "Huh? What?"

"Edward, or Eddie, as you call him. Do you love him?" It was genuine concern in her voice.

"I-" *Shit, do I?* "N-no. He- I- We met- We *just* met. No." He was swallowing his own foot and he knew it.

She smiled. "You know, any guy would immediately go for the *we're not gay* answer, but you went for the *we just met.*"

Fuck. He laughed nervously and stared into space.

"My brother is gay. I'm the only one in the family who still talks to him. I was just curious, not trying to put you on the spot. I'm sorry."

"It's... Eddie is not gay. He's engaged. To a woman, actually."

"Oh?" She seemed genuinely surprised.

"Yeah, we're just friends." He sighed in relief. He had almost outed

Eddie.

"But you'd like to be more?"

Richie felt like he was in therapy. "No." *That's a lie, Richie*. From the corner of his eye he saw Stan and a guy he had seen talking to Eddie before. Once he realized they were walking in their direction he felt the anxiety kick in. "Please, don't-"

"I won't say anything, your secret is safe with me." She winked.

"Hi, my darling." Stan pecked her lips. "Mr. Tozier." Stan held out his hand and Richie shook it.

"Richie, please." He asked.

"Darling, I'm sorry to interrupt, but someone important would like to meet you."

"Oh, of course!" She touched Richie's forearm lightly. She was checking on him. "I'm so sorry, dear."

"No, no, of course. It was nice to talk to you."

"Richie." Stan gave a nod. "Mr. Bowers." No nod. Both him and Patty walked away, leaving Richie alone with Connor.

"So."

"I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Connor. I'm Edward's lawyer."

"Ah." Richie already hated him.

"Yeah, I'm not surprised he didn't introduce us."

"Excuse me?" Richie tightened his lips.

"You fit in quite well."

Richie finally knew what he was talking about and it must have been obvious in his face because Connor followed it up with "Yeahhh, he

told me."

"Not much to tell."

Connor touched the tips of Richie's hair, but it felt wrong. It felt disgusting. It wasn't like that with Eddie. It had never been like that with Eddie. Connor was looking at him like his mean clients did. Richie felt small, even though he stood taller than the other man. He told himself to slap Connor's hand away, but his body wouldn't answer the commands from his brain. He was shutting down. Connor looked around them for anyone watching and pushed Richie against the tree that stood close. Richie thought he might throw up when Connor's hand cupped between Richie's legs and he felt the disgusting man's breath on his neck. *Move, move, move, Richie.* But he couldn't. *No, please.* He tried to speak, but nothing came out.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Connor was startled back from Richie's body just as he was about to kiss him, and Richie immediately collapsed onto the dirt and fallen tree leaves. Connor chuckled with his dick noticeably hard through his slacks. "I was just welcoming him to the Kaspbrak clan, *Eddie.*" Edward tilted his head to the side but said nothing.

He helped Richie up and held his face in his hands staring into his eyes for a few seconds. Richie knew he was trying to apologise without making a scene and that made him feel worse; Eddie didn't have to apologise. Richie was a hooker; he was being treated the way he always had. This was new for Eddie, not him. Eddie held his hand and walked him past Connor, purposefully hitting his shoulder on the way and staring at him with such pure *hatred,* that Richie wanted to cry.

They crossed the farm's length with Connor on their tail, his hands in his pockets. People were definitely staring at Richie and Eddie and the fact they were holding hands.

"You should probably tell Myra about the boyfriend, Edward!" Connor shouted, causing several mouths to open.

Patty took a step forward, but her knowing husband, not wanting to

see his wife get hurt, held her wrist and shook his head. He understood, but he couldn't let her do it. Eddie didn't stop to defend himself either and he sure as hell didn't need anyone else to. He was past caring. He was getting Richie out of there as quick as his feet allowed him.

"Kaspbrak." A deep imposing voice made itself heard.

Now, *that* made Eddie stop.

"So, this is why my daughter is at home, right now." Harry Rutherfurd, his future son-in-law. Eddie didn't even know he was there. "You have to be out of your mind if you think I'm letting her marry a faggot."

Fuck it. He looked over his shoulder and locked his fingers with Richie's. "She's probably fucking someone right now, actually. Give her a call." And he kept walking, pulling Richie along.

--

The ride to the hotel had been quiet, with Eddie staring out the window and Richie stealing half a second looks at him. This was all his fault. Eddie got outed and it was his fault for not playing along with Connor's game. He should have given him what he wanted. He was just another man, anyway, right? He could have sucked his dick or whatever and it would have kept Eddie's personal life intact.

He opened the door to the penthouse and Richie immediately ran to the bathroom, slammed the door closed and emptied the contents of his stomach into the toilet. Not a minute passed before Eddie was walking in and sitting on the floor next to Richie. He ran his flat palm up and down Richie's back in gentle comforting touches. Richie heaved once, twice, and threw up the rest of his lunch.

Eddie helped him out of the tweed jacket and threw it on the floor. He pressed the button to flush and walked over to the sink, where he submerged a face towel fully under the cold water. He wrung it in his

fists just enough so it wouldn't drip, and he walked back to the toilet, where he resumed his position sitting next to Richie.

He held Richie's face in his hands gently and cleaned the sweat and tears with the cold towel, always watching his eyes for any discomfort, but Richie wasn't looking at him, he couldn't bring himself to look at him. This was all his fault, he ruined Eddie's life, he was a whore, and he was dirty, and he was ruining Eddie's life. If he were a good person, if he were someone worthy of knowing Eddie, he wouldn't have been- Connor wouldn't have- He started to sob.

Eddie set the towel down and immediately pulled him close. Richie resisted at first and Eddie let go, raising his hands. His body language screamed *I won't touch you if you don't want me to, I would never do that. I'm not him.* and that made Richie lunge forward and bury his face in his chest. Eddie wrapped his arms around him.

"It's okay, it's okay. I have you." He held the back of Richie's head and ran his fingers through his hair. "Shhh... I have you."

"I'msorryI'msorryI'msorry." His entire body was shaking. His voice was hoarse and muffled against Eddie's chest.

"Sweetheart..." Eddie clicked his tongue. "Can I look at you?" Richie didn't answer and Eddie didn't push.

Richie had never hated himself quite like this, but he hated the way Eddie was acting a little more still. Why was he being nice to him? Why? His life was probably ruined, and he was still taking care of him? Telling him everything was okay and holding him and cleaning his face? Richie was almost angry. He stood up and bolted to the bedroom, standing in the middle of it. Eddie followed him with a concerned look, then he sat on the bed and put his head in his hands.

A minute passed, then two, then three. “Do you want me to leave?” Richie asked, barely a whisper. *Guilt.*

Eddie nodded before realizing he was even doing it, but his face was still in his hands, so he didn't see Richie’s eyes point towards the penthouse door. When he heard it open and looked up, he was startled to see him disappear under the frame. The door barely had

time to close before Eddie was running after him. First, *I didn't pay him.* Then, *please, don't go, don't leave me.*

He grabbed the door handle with enough force to hurt his palm and make him forget that his brain had definitely just crossed a precious line without his permission; something which seemed to be happening quite a lot since Richie had stepped foot in that stupid fucking car. *Don't leave me*. Not the room, not the hotel. *Me.*

Richie stood with only a few of the clothes that Eddie had bought him. They were his, they were a gift, and Eddie was slightly stung by the thought that Richie didn't want them. Richie looked like a fucking mess and he didn't take his eyes from the elevator doors, even after fully noticing Eddie standing there. And Eddie just stared at him for a few seconds. *You moron, where are you going?*

"Where are you-" He inhaled sharply. "Where are you going?" His brow was tight, and his face didn't give an inch.

"You said you wanted me to leave? I asked. It's okay, you don't have to pay me, considering I just fucking ruined your life, Eddie"

Eddie's expression softened immediately at the sound of the nickname he had hated so much in the beginning. Richie blushed.

"I didn't mean leave the- Richie, look at me." He does. "Come inside."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to."

Richie walked slowly back into the room, Eddie's hand grazing his as he walked past him, and sat down on the bed. Eddie kneeled in front of him, like he had done that morning to tie his shoes. "I'm sorry-" His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat, blinking a few times. "I'm so sorry he did that to you."

Richie looked at Eddie like he was an alien. "It's *my* fault."

"In what way was that your fault?"

Richie looked at the ceiling and felt the tears well up again. He didn't know why Eddie meant so much to him, he just knew he did. "I'm me. He probably felt he could-"

"Feelings are not facts, Richard. And the fact is he assaulted you and-"

"Why aren't you mad at me?"

Eddie smiled sympathetically and Richie could hear his heart breaking. "Why would I be mad?"

“Because it’s my fault he-” Richie raised his voice.

Eddie pressed two fingers against his lips. “No. You’re not doing that. I don’t know how many times this has happened to you that made it seem okay or normal, but it is not okay, and it is not normal, and it is definitely not your fucking fault.” He sighed and leaned his head on Richie’s knee, then he spoke softly, without looking up. “I wish I could put through your thick head that you deserve to be treated with respect, Richie. You deserve- Fuck, Richie-” He looked up. “You’re more than that, you-”

“Why are you so nice to me?”

“I just told you why.” Eddie moved up and sat next to him. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” He hovered Richie’s body with his hands, not wanting to be another guy putting his hands on him without permission.

Richie leaned his forehead against Eddie, as if giving him permission to touch. Eddie brushed Richie’s curls and, the same way he always did, he traced his jawline. *I wish I could kiss you; I wish I could-*

"Did I just blow up your career?” Richie asked, still in Eddie’s safe embrace; that’s how he felt there, safe.

“Nah.” A smile. Richie exhaled and Eddie wrapped his arms around his shoulders. “But my position in *New York's esteemed high-society*?” He mocked, calling back to Richie’s hatred for it. “Definitely.”

Richie laughed, then his face turned sad again. Eddie played with one special curl on the side of Richie’s face. “I’m firing him after the deal

is final."

"What? Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"Oh, fuck, because he outed you. I'm sorry…"

Eddie laughed. "I don't care about that, but I'm not working with someone who hurt you."

Richie wanted to ask why again, because if he was being honest (and he was honest most times), it didn't make sense for Eddie to fire an old friend and colleague for someone he was never going to see again. Unless… No, Richie couldn't allow himself these thoughts. He couldn't allow himself these feelings in the first place. "Oh."

"I'd fire him tomorrow, but his name is already on all the documents."

"It was my fault he did that. He told everyone, because I didn't let him-"

"No."

Richie sighed and Eddie caressed his cheek. "Are you-"

"Let me guess. Am I hungry?"

"I was going to ask if you're okay…" Richie nodded and opened his mouth to speak when Eddie interrupted. "Don't say you're used to it."

Richie's face was enough answer. Eddie called room service.

--

They were facing each other in bed, legs tangled together and sharing stories. Eddie didn't try to have sex with Richie that night, in fact, it hadn't crossed his mind. After having breakfast for dinner, and Richie

fussing over how rich people can truly have anything, including a hotel kitchen to go off the menu's schedule, they had gotten under the covers fully intending to sleep, but getting lost in each other's voices instead.

Richie liked looking at Eddie. He had a softer jaw than his, and his eyes were big, dark and held so much in them. Richie thought Eddie had kind eyes, but at the same time the kind of eyes that can make you feel so raw, so seen, soul bare and exposed. His lips were thin and light pink. Those lips had been on Richie's neck and chest; Richie had never wanted to kiss anyone this bad in his life. He wouldn't cross that line.

Eddie closed his eyes for a few seconds as he spoke, and Richie took that opportunity to really look at him. He had less freckles on his face, compared to his body, but they were still quite noticeable, mostly concentrated on his nose and under his eyes. His nose was small and perky, matching his strong features and rare beauty perfectly. He was truly a beautiful man. Richie wondered if he had been drastically different in his early twenties. Richie looked nothing like he did at 21, and it had only been 9 years, so, he felt safe assuming Eddie had changed a lot in the past 20 years of his life.

He realized Eddie's smaller frame probably meant that he had been a really skinny kid, and that was just about the funniest thing, because Eddie had just spent thirty minutes telling him about how scrapy he was in college, getting into fist fights easier than anyone probably should. He wore his emotions on his fists, it seemed. Richie admired how he had managed to change and control his temper. Most ill-tempered men, and Richie knew a lot of them, only got worse and more violent as the years went on.

He couldn't imagine Eddie angry. Well, he *could*, he had seen his face when he looked at Connor as they exited the event, but he couldn't imagine Eddie hitting someone. He couldn't imagine a situation that would warrant Eddie to lose it like that.

Richie opened up as well. This was new to him, talking about himself, his fears, his life. He told Eddie about how, when he was a kid, he got beat up a lot for being very clearly a "fairy" and how angry his father had been, not at the kids, but at Richie, for being

weaker, soft-spoken. He told him about how his father never once told him he loved him and kept it down to his last breath, about his two sisters he watched grow up, but hadn't seen since he was 16 and ran away from home, about his mother who had cried to him about "failing to raise him right" because he was gay, on the night of his 14th birthday.

He told Eddie about how he started turning tricks, about how Bill had taught him to keep quiet and not fight them even if something was off, because losing some money and getting a few bruises was better than showing up dead, about the no-kissing rule. He told him about his first night with a John, how he dissociated during the whole thing, how he cried himself to sleep that night. He did not, however, tell him about how he had shut down their first night together too, because he didn't want Eddie to feel like he had been like Connor at some point. He hadn't. He was nothing like him. He made Richie feel good, maybe even loved, even if it was all in Richie's head.

Then, Eddie told him about his own work. It was a good gig, he was a millionaire, he couldn't complain. He had built his own company out of spite because of his mother. He had wanted to be an engineer for a few years, before college came along. He had always loved to build things, to actually make something with his own hands. To look for problems and fix them. In high school he had wanted to get a job as a mechanic, but his mother had practically had a stroke at the mere suggestion of her son working *a mundane job with some simpleton that owned an auto shop* in the city. Richie tried not to think about Eddie in a jumpsuit, with oily hands and rolled up sleeves, stretched under a car.

Richie's eyelids were growing heavy. He felt warm and comfortable, and the smell of Eddie's lavender bodywash coming from both their bodies was lulling him to sleep. Eddie touched his forehead lightly with his thumb and Richie opened his eyes again, a faint smile on his lips. Eddie's eyes gazed at his lips, then back to his forehead.

"Am I boring you?" He tittered.

Richie shook his head and closed his eyes again. "I'm just comfy and warm."

“And sleepy.”

“And sleepy.” He agreed.

“Can you do me a favour?” Eddie’s cheeks were pink when Richie opened his eyes to look at him.

“Y-yeah?”

“Can you-” He sighed, then he settled on opening his arms and hoping Richie would take the hint.

Richie smiled and moved closer to Eddie, who wrapped his arms around Richie’s torso. Richie rest his cheek against Eddie’s heart and swore he could hear it speed up just a little. They fell asleep like that, in each other’s arms, legs tangled, bodies flush and warm, stomachs full of pancakes and tea and hair still damp. Richie smiled against his chest and Eddie could feel it. He smiled too.

“Sleep well, Eds.”

“Goodnight, love.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Fanart by my friend @HonkyCat5

You can find me on twitter HERE

Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hi! Welcome back. I apologise for taking a while to update, but I had a rough few weeks. Here it is, though! Chapter IV.
>
> Content warnings: homophobic slurs, period-typical homophobia, talks about religion, religion related homophobia, discussion of dissociation, sexual content - not too graphic.
>
> Eddie does some introspection!! <3
> Enjoy!

Eddie rubbed his feet on the soft fabric of the bedsheets and squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to wake up just yet. Waking up meant he would have to get out of bed, get dressed and go to work; it meant he would have to leave Richie alone again; it meant he would have to face Connor. He hadn't started to process the day yet, when he realized someone was playing with his hair, running their fingers through it. It was soothing, Eddie could have easily fallen back asleep like that. He shifted his position, before slowly opening his eyes. He took in the light coming from the window, until he settled his gaze on Richie, who kept rubbing little circles on his scalp. He looked well rested and Eddie's body relaxed with him, enjoying the feeling of being under his gaze. *I could do this every day; I could wake up next to you every day.*

Richie was smiling at him with so much love, Eddie had to say something; he had to speak before the moment became too heavy, too much. "I-"

"Before you get mad, I'm sorry."

Eddie was confused. "Hm?"

"It's uh-" Richie looked at him, then down. "It's 9:45."

Eddie's eyes widened for half a second. Then, he smiled. "Oh?" He smiled so wide it hurt.

Richie blushed and his eyes flickered all over Eddie's face. "Well, you looked really comfortable and I haven't been awake that long." He excused himself, his voice was small. "I just- You looked-" *You looked so beautiful; I couldn't give it up.* "- peaceful." *I wanted to keep you to myself.*

Eddie reached for him, rubbing gentle circles on his upper arm with his thumb. "It's okay. I needed the sleep, I think."

Richie shoved his face on the pillow and Eddie traced the length of his back with an open palm. Richie always looked so small when they were in bed together, years of experience curling himself in and taking up as little space as he could, afraid to take too much, to be too much; afraid of the rejection that followed when he gave himself room to breathe and exist in all his splendour. Eddie wanted to let Richie be himself, be big, imposing, beautiful; Richie was a sight, almost dangerous to behold. He could blind Eddie if allowed to fully shine; and, God, did Eddie want to be blind for him.

"What are you gonna do, today?" Eddie whispered, his hand reaching the nape of Richie's neck and playing with the hair there.

Richie's spine curled in a shudder. He shrugged and closed his eyes.

"Are you still tired?"

"No, but if you keep doing that, I *will* fall asleep."

Eddie pulled himself closer to Richie and enveloped an arm around his middle. Richie's breath caught in his chest as Eddie leaned in to plant a kiss on his temple, then another one on the top of his head. *I wish I could stay here with you, love. My love.* "I wish I didn't have to go to work. Especially after-" He let the memory of the day before hang in the air.

"You could take the day off."

Eddie blinked a few times, as if Richie were speaking a foreign language. *Take the day off? Me?* "I haven't taken a day off in 15

years." He rolled around so he could lie on his back.

Richie's mouth formed into a perfect little O. Eddie wanted to kiss it shut. "What is all that hard work for if you don't give yourself time to collect the benefits, Mr. Kaspbrak?"

"I know, I know."

Richie perched himself up on one elbow and brushed Eddie's hair with his free hand. "How is the deal coming along?"

Eddie sighed. "After yesterday, I don't know. I don't know what's going through Uris's mind."

Richie smiled sheepishly, but that feeling of guilt that had been gnawing at his chest since he woke up that morning and laid there watching Eddie sleep was still very much present, and it was making itself difficult to ignore. It must have looked obvious, or Richie must have given it away somehow, despite his smile, because Eddie reached up and placed a warm reassuring palm on Richie's cheek. "Are you spiralling, again, honey?"

Honey. It tasted like it. It spilled between his lips like it. It stuck to him like it. He wondered if Richie's lips tasted as sweet as he was, as sweet as he sounded. Eddie had more than once found himself thinking of the soft breathy moans he managed to coax out of Richie. He wanted more, he wanted so much. He wanted to know what his moans sounded like against Eddie's welcoming mouth; if their voices would mix together to create a whole new sound, their sound.

He was almost grateful it would be over soon. He would move on and this - them - would remain semi-professional, semi-bearable, without the agony of longing for a kiss that would never come. Eddie didn't want to know this kiss, not if he had to leave Richie behind, not if this kiss was just going to be taken from him. He didn't want to love this man; he couldn't possibly love this man.

Richie leaned into the gentle warmth of Eddie's palm and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. None of what happened is." If Eddie could say

more, he would. *I love you, that's your fault.* Then he kicked himself for that thought; he didn't want to love this man. He could not love this man. "If I took the day off, what would we even do?"

Richie raised an eyebrow, knowing exactly where to start.

He jumped up from under the covers and started bouncing on the bed. "Eddie, baby, you have to let your hair down."

Eddie was laughing. He clasped his hands over his chest, as he looked up at Richie, still bouncing up and down, making a mess of the covers. He was being silly, loud, himself. He looked genuinely happy and Eddie wanted to grab him and pull him back into his arms, like the night before. He wanted to wrap himself around this beautiful man and never let go. *Only two more days*. "I miss you, already." He just blurted it out, before realizing he was thinking it.

Richie stopped at the words and something sad took over his eyes. He lowered himself down on the mattress and sat on his knees. Eddie tapped his chest with his index and middle fingers and Richie squirmed closer, until he was lying between Eddie's legs, his cheek pressed to Eddie's chest. He kissed over his Adam's apple and felt it move when Eddie swallowed. "I've had a lovely, lovely time."

Eddie clicked his tongue and wrapped his arms around Richie, who held him back in return.

"We can't stay here all day; it'll be a waste of your day off."

"Yeah?" He smiled at the man still lying on his chest. "Where would you wanna go?"

"Have you been to Kenneth Hahn?"

"I don't think so. What is that?"

"A park." Richie perched himself up to look at Eddie.

"You wanna go to a park with me?" He brushed Richie's hair back. He would never get tired of touching him.

"We can have a picnic."

"Hm." Eddie quirked his head to the side and squinted at Richie, in fake ponder.

"Pleaseeee." Richie played along. The rituals were intricate.

"Okay, okay." He chuckled lightly and pinched his nose. "Picnic it is."

--

"Mr. Bowers."

"What, Madison, what?" He shouted at the young girl still gripping the phone's handset, holding it to her right ear.

"Don't worry, Maddy, he's getting fired in two days." The voice on the other end spoke in a soft voice. She always thought Mr. Kaspbrak was nice; stiff, but nice.

She smiled to herself and it only angered Connor more. "Mr. Kaspbrak is not coming to work today."

"Excuse me?"

"He says he's taking the day off." Her smile was smug; Connor's forehead vein throbbed.

"Give me the pho-" He demanded but was interrupted by the young assistant. She set the handset down with a loud click, satisfied with herself, and Connor walked back into the office, slamming the door behind him.

"How did that go?" Richie asked, approaching Eddie from behind. He was already fully dressed, albeit a little too formal for a picnic. Richie shook his head absolutely enamoured. "You're adorable." He started undoing the man's tie.

"Maddy can handle him, that's why I hired her- What, uh- what are you doing?"

"You don't need a tie for a picnic, honey." There it was again. That fucking word. *Honey*. It was even sweeter when it came from Richie's mouth. Everything was sweeter when it came from Richie. "It's adorable you even thought to put one on. Do you have any low shoes? Please, don't wear formal footwear. It's a park! You'll get blisters!"

Eddie just smiled at him; his heart felt too big for his body at that moment. *I love him, don't I? Well...what now?*

"What are you smiling at?" Richie was looking down at him, undoing the top three buttons of Eddie's shirt.

"You."

"Why?" He smiled back.

Eddie rested his hand flat over Richie's sternum. He could feel his heartbeat, strong and steady. *Boom, boom, boom.* "No reason. Just you." *Boom, boom, boom.* "You make me smile." *Boomboomboomboom.*

Richie cleared his throat and fixed Eddie's collar, pulling back just enough that Eddie can no longer touch his chest without it being suspicious. Eddie felt something catch in his throat, a discomfort, pricking at the back of it. He tried to swallow it down, but it wouldn't dissipate. He felt he had just pushed a boundary, crossed a line that had been invisible thus far, broke some sort of unspoken rule between them.

Despite this, Richie still let Eddie hold his hand as they rode the elevator down, crossed the lobby and walked to the car. This time Eddie drove, and for the entire trip he resisted resting his hand on Richie's thigh, keeping both his hands on the steering wheel.

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The sun was high, shining down on the two men. New York sunshine was no match to the warmth LA had to offer, even in the middle of

November. Richie had been cold the past couple of days, but the weather decided to work with them to make this picnic one they would remember as a happy day and look back on with tenderness, maybe with wishes that something more had come of it; instead, it was known between the two of them that this would come to an end, sooner than later. It didn't mean it had to hurt any less. *A bit too soon for melancholy*, Richie thought.

I miss you, already. Richie pinched his eyes shut, turning his vision into a kaleidoscope of colours when he opened them again and was hit with the light. He hissed. He had been lying on Eddie's lap, a towel spread on the grass underneath them. Eddie was playing with his hair and Richie just looked at him, something he had become very good at. Looking at Eddie Kaspbrak was his true calling. He could make a religion out of it.

Richie took Eddie's free hand and laced their fingers together. He didn't want to think about it, he just wanted to do it. He was done thinking. He was going to enjoy him while he could. *I love-*

Something seemed to click behind Eddie's eyes, and he smiled at the sky, then down at Richie. Richie forgot his train of thought whenever Eddie hit him with that look, that excited about something, wide smile, big eyes look. "Did you ever get around to buying a tuxedo? Something more formal?"

"Wh- Y-yes? Why?"

"I'm taking you somewhere tomorrow."

"And I need a fancy suit for this?"

"Yes." His smile grew even wider.

Richie wanted to either strangle him or kiss him and never let go. "Where are we going?"

Eddie pretended to lock his lips and throw away the key.

"Why so secretive all of a sudden, Mr. Kaspbrak?"

"Because it's a surprise. I don't know if you'll like it though, so don't

build it up in your head, please."

"Mmm... Alright." Richie sat up and kneeled in front of Eddie. He untied Eddie's shoes.

"What are you doing?"

"Have you ever felt the grass under your feet?"

"No? I don't want an infection, why would I do that?"

"An infec- You crack me up, Eds." He pulled off Eddie's socks then started working at his own shoes, kicking them off and removing his socks as well. Richie stood up and held his hand out to Eddie.

Eddie stared at Richie's face, then at his hand, then at his face again. "No."

"Eds."

"Definitely not."

"Do you ever let go?" He crouched in front of him.

"All the time."

"Wow, your first time lying to me. How dare you? Come on." He grabbed his hand and pulled him up.

Eddie forgot Richie had five inches and a fair number of pounds on him, but he was quickly reminded when Richie pulled him up with ease and threw him over his shoulder. Eddie yelped and squirmed around, kicking, but never wanting to actually hurt him; Richie, however, had a good grip on him, so Eddie's efforts were a waste of energy. He put him down on the grass, a few feet away from the blanket, far away enough that he wouldn't be able to reach it without Richie grabbing him first.

Richie held Eddie's hands in his and looked into his eyes. "Feel that?" Eddie nodded and leaned his forehead against Richie's. "Isn't it relaxing?" Richie whispered, giving in to Eddie's pull, trying to bring him closer.

They stayed like that, feet pawing at the freshly cut grass, still damp from the sprinklers. Richie began swaying from side to side, bringing Eddie along with him. He was mouthing a song, but Eddie couldn't make out the words, only the melody falling from Richie's lips. He wrapped one hand around the back of Richie's neck, the other he rested on his chest. Richie enveloped Eddie fully in his arms, their foreheads never parting from each other. Eddie could hear him now.

But you misread my meaning when I met you

Closed the door and left me blinded by the light

Eddie smiled softly, no longer minding the grass beneath his feet. He tilted his head back slightly so he could look at Richie, surprised to find his eyes closed. Eddie moved so he could wrap both his arms around Richie's neck, and Richie opened his eyes at the change. His lips were slightly parted and shiny from licking them. Eddie didn't try to pretend he wasn't staring. *Kiss me.*

Although I search myself, it's always someone else I see

I'd just allow a fragment of your life to wander free

Richie's heart was cut open, spewing, messy. He was right there, bleeding at Eddie's feet, and Eddie wasn't pulling away, but pressing closer. He was holding Richie back. They had each other right there, inches apart, it would only take Eddie pushing up, or Richie changing the angle of his head, for them to- *Fuck, I wish you'd kiss me, I wish you'd send caution to the fucking wind and just kiss me.* He stopped singing.

Eddie pulled away from him and kneaded his feet on the grass, noticing it again. It really was a nice feeling, Richie was right. Maybe letting go wasn't so bad. In moderation. When Eddie looked back at

him, Richie was sporting a grin. "Oh, what now?"

Richie looked at the lake, then at Eddie and wiggled his eyebrows.

"No."

"Come on."

"No, Richard."

Richie pouted, but he let Eddie win this one. They had a bathtub at home- *At the penthouse.* "Fuck, I keep doing that."

"Hm?"

"What?"

"You said you keep doing that. Doing what?"

Richie looked everywhere except at Eddie. "Nothing, I was just thinking. Don't mind me."

I mind you. I mind you a lot, Richie, you have no idea how much. "Are you hungry?"

"Jesus, I thought you'd never ask."

Eddie frowned and had to hold it together not to scream. "You could have said-" He grabbed Richie's hand. "You're impossible."

--

Richie was going to break him if he kept giving him orgasms like that, Eddie was sure of it. They had just fallen on the bed, after exchanging hand jobs in the shower. It had been Richie's idea to shower together, so Eddie was now even more convinced that Richie was trying to murder him. It was definitely an improvement from the first night, although that night they had penetrative sex, and maybe that had been the problem. Eddie did that very rarely, maybe he just

wasn't good at it. He should have stuck to the hand jobs; he mastered those a long time ago.

Richie's hair was still soaking wet, he always did a terrible job drying it with the towel, and still refused to blow dry it. *It's curly, Eds, it'll get frizzy*. Eddie lied next to Richie, who was still planking. He scratched his scalp playfully, sending his hair flying in all directions. Richie rolled over lazily and looked up at Eddie. Eddie decided in that moment that Richie was meant to be looking up at him, whether in bed or on his knees. That's how Eddie liked him. There was something about his wide shoulders, and his sharp jaw, and those fucking blue eyes staring up at him, that drove Eddie absolutely wild with both lust and love. He wanted, and he wanted, and he would keep wanting long after Richie left. He was terrified of this.

Both these things were new to him: loving someone like this; and knowing he couldn't have it. There was never anything Eddie wanted that he couldn't have, and maybe that was why Richie felt different. Maybe Eddie wanted him because he knew he couldn't have him. Could that be all this was? A rich man's petty little wish? Eddie didn't want that to be true, because Richie made him feel good and he wanted that feeling to be real; and because it would make him an absolute piece of shit if Richie was a game to him, something he had to have so he could stop wanting and obsessing over him.

"Richie, you know, I-" The telephone rang, cutting him off. Eddie stared at the man lying next to him in nothing but his boxers, chest broad and inviting, as if he didn't know where the sound was coming from. He wanted to sink his teeth on Richie's shoulders, lick down the length of his entire torso and-

"Eddie." Richie smiled, pulling him out of his dick crazed trance. "The phone, love."

Eddie stood up and grabbed the handset right on the last ring. "Edward Kaspbrak, speaking." He heard Richie laugh and squinted at him. Suddenly, his back stiffened and Richie sat up on the bed, straightening up as well at the strained sound of Eddie's voice. "Stanley, how are you?" Richie smiled and slumped back down.

"I'm good, Edward. I was calling for my wife, actually, she wouldn't

rest until I checked in on you and Richie."

"Oh." He looked towards Richie sprawled on the bed.

"Very sorry if we're intruding, but for some reason she's attached to him." He chuckled softly, it seemed genuine.

"Yeah." Eddie sighed, watching the slow rise and fall of Richie's chest. "He has that effect on people."

His answer caused Richie to turn his head on its side and look in Eddie's direction. He frowned and Eddie grinned, shaking his head.

"So, how are you?"

"We're alright." He inhaled shakily. "Stanley, I don't know what this means for our-" Eddie scratched his forehead with his thumb.

"Nothing. Business is business, Edward. Besides, I'm not the type of person who cares for that sort of thing. I care that you're a good man, are you a good man, Edward?"

"I- Yes, I'd like to think so." *Despite what I'm trying to do to your company... Fuck. No. No, I'm not a good man.*

"Then, everything else is just...what it has to be, don't you think?"

"What it has to be." He looked at Richie again. Richie had rolled onto his stomach and was staring at Eddie, elbows bent and head in his hands.

"Mm." Stan agreed. "You know what I mean?"

"I'm starting to, I think."

"How long will you be in town for?"

"I leave Tuesday morning." Stanley remained silent. "We should meet. How's Monday? Day after tomorrow, 9:30am sharp. Bring your lawyers."

"Alright." A deep breath. "Say hi to Richie. From Patty."

"Will do."

When Eddie hung up, Richie sat up, folding his knees. "So?"

"We're meeting on Monday."

"I heard. I thought you were leaving on Monday."

"I leave Tuesday." He sat on the bed and gingerly touched Richie's jawline.

"Oh."

"What?"

"You only asked me to stay until Monday."

Eddie thought back and yes, he had. At the time, he had hired Richie to be his date to events, so he wouldn't be needing his services past Monday morning. "I-"

"It's fine, Eddie." He rubbed circles on Eddie's thigh. "It really is okay; I was just asking."

Eddie pressed forward, sitting closer to Richie. He laced their fingers together and basked in the glory of the beautiful half-naked man in front of him. *Does he feel it too? Is this all in my head?* "Richie-" He allowed their foreheads to touch.

"Yeah..." Richie whispered, breath hot and heavy.

Eddie eased his free hand onto Richie's chest, a flat palm over his beating heart. Their eyes met and Eddie felt it, he saw it in Richie's face - they wanted the same. "Richie, can I-" The phone rang, interrupting him once more. "Oh, for fuck-" He stood up and grabbed the handset. "Hello!"

Richie sat still, unmoved; face like he'd been shot. A few feet away, the colour drained from Eddie's face. He mumbled something into the phone and set it down. "Get dressed."

"Hm?"

"Put some clothes on, Rich."

A total of three minutes passed before Eddie was opening the penthouse door and Harry was stepping inside. Eddie became a different person; Eddie became Richie, with his head down, shoulders hunched, small.

Mr. Rutherfurd was an imposing, condescending, utter cunt, Richie decided. He walked past Eddie without a word, like he owned the place, and all the blood rushed to Richie's fists.

Richie sat on the couch, legs crossed at the ankles and a pillow on his lap. Eddie walked in front of him and sat on the armchair; he wondered if Eddie hadn't sat next to him purposefully.

"I would like to speak to Edward in private." Harry looked coldly at Richie.

Richie inhaled shakily and rested the pillow on the empty couch space next to him. His eyes met Eddie's hastily, not wanting to add fuel to the fire Rutherfurd was preparing to ignite. *Light a fire under a couple gays... That hits a little too close, Richie.* Richie was just off the couch when he noticed Eddie's expression change into something darker, heavier. Richie hadn't seen that expression before. He gave Eddie a look which he returned.

Will you be alright?

Always am. Wait for me.

Once Richie was out of earshot, Eddie moved to the couch, settling into the warmth of the seat where Richie had been. "If you've come here to insult me, Harry… You don't despise me more than I despise myself."

Harry's face gave nothing away; Eddie had learned that from him. "I didn't take you for one of them, Edward. These…immoral men."

The affirmation caused Eddie to dig his nails into his palms. Was it immoral? Was Eddie a sinner? Dirty? One of *them*? He looked at Harry and quickly averted his eyes. Had he really fought all his adult life to get out from under his mother's shadow, only to be caught in a

haughty man's grasp?

Back in the sleeping area of the large penthouse, Richie paced, unable to make out the words spoken by the two men lounging in the living room. There wasn't a big age difference between them, maybe ten years. He wondered how old Myra was for a few seconds, but quickly pushed it away, deeming it none of his business. He was sure Eddie had his reasons for getting engaged to this man's daughter; a man Eddie had clearly respected once, worked with, maybe even learned from.

"God, Edward-" Harry started. "God isn't blind."

"I don't know. Harry. I don't know. It's not something I chose. Trust me, I wish I wasn't-" He couldn't finish the sentence. He couldn't say it. Eddie put his head in his hands. "I don't know why you're here." His voice was muffled, not that he was trying to actually be heard. "I promise Myra and I will talk when I am back in New York, just- Please..."

"You're not going anywhere near my daughter, son."

Richie peeked in from the bedroom, hearing Rutherfurd's raised voice.

"Do you think you can still marry her? I told her about your little secret and about the fa- other one, in the other room. Even if she took you back, I wouldn't allow it." He had gotten up half-way through talking.

Eddie was leaning fully back on the couch, hands in his lap, fidgeting, picking at his cuticles. He looked down, unable to face the other man. His eyes were burning but he resisted the urge to rub them with his sleeves. Rutherfurd didn't appreciate men who cried. Eddie didn't want to be one of them.

It was enough. Richie flung himself into the living room. "Out. Get out." He took Eddie by the hand.

Eddie looked up from the couch at him and Richie was vibrating in place. Eddie squeezed his hand, drawing something, anything, he

could hold on to just from the heat emanating from Richie's palm.

"I'm sorry, but…" Richie stopped and looked at Eddie. *Don't let him talk to you like this; you'd never let anyone talk to me like this.*

"Oh, you let him speak for you, now?" Rutherfurd sounded almost amused.

Eddie turned to Rutherfurd, opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out besides a choked noise.

"Get out." Richie repeated, awfully calm. He dropped Eddie's hand, walked past Rutherfurd towards the door, turned the knob and held it open.

Eddie followed him with his eyes. Richie stood under the threshold with his arms crossed, eyebrows raised, and lips tight. "Eddie may have a reputation, but so do you."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Rutherfurd threatened.

"It means don't make me call security."

Rutherfurd looked at Eddie and simply shook his head before straightening his jacket and crossing the length of the penthouse. He walked through the threshold, not acknowledging Richie standing at the door. The elevator doors opened, and he disappeared inside.

"Fuck you." Richie slammed the door closed and leaned his entire body against it, his forehead hitting the wood with a loud thud.

Eddie remained on the couch, frozen in place, hands wringing until they hurt. Richie caught up with his own breathing; he hadn't noticed how worked up he had gotten. He consciously relaxed his shoulders, his facial expression evening out too, softening. He walked slowly towards the couch, a weak little smile hanging from his lips, as his eyes found Eddie's small, folded figure; no hint of the man Richie had gotten to know that week.

Eddie felt tired. Ten minutes before he had been wrapped around Richie, feeling more alive than he had ever felt in his life. Now he felt dirty, like all the progress he had made over the years coming to

terms with his sexuality had been erased.

Richie stood kind of awkwardly in the vicinity of the couch, until he decided to sit down on the armchair, where Rutherfurd had been. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees and head in his hands, and he waited. He was certain he had crossed a line, so he was giving Eddie time to process before he could call him out on it.

It never came. Five minutes passed; then, it was ten. Eddie had leaned back on the couch after three, not that Richie was paying close attention to the clock on the wall behind Eddie. Richie stood up. He didn't know where he was going, or what he was doing. He rubbed his arms, noticing at last that he was cold.

"Richie." Eddie called.

Richie looked down at the couch and Eddie's eyes were red as they stared at some invisible spot ahead of him. "Yeah."

Eddie looked at him. "You're hovering."

"I'm sorry…"

Eddie rubbed his left eye on the side of his arm. "Come here."

Richie was quick to reach the couch, wrapping both his arms around Eddie's shoulders. He kissed the top of his head, like it was the most natural thing in the world, like he and Eddie did that every day. Like he was saying good morning, and Eddie was waiting for him with freshly made coffee. The thought alone made Eddie's head spin with longing; it was only a beautiful dream. He always wanted what he couldn't have. Eddie sighed, exhaling heavily through his nose.

"Are you okay?"

Eddie shook his head slowly, tickling Richie's face with his hair. One tear creeped out from the corner of his eye, leaving a wet trail down his cheek. Richie shifted to let Eddie lay on his chest. “Thank you.” Eddie murmured.

“I don’t know what- why you got like that, but I get it, Eddie.” Richie’s breathing seemed timed, like he was trying to calm Eddie

down with it. “I get it.” He rubbed small circles on his back.

“I’m sorry you had to hear those things too.”

“The God stuff? It means nothing to me, anymore.”

“You don’t believe in God?”

Richie sighed and appeared to be pondering his words. “I stopped for a while, because of the things I heard back home. I didn’t want to believe in an all-loving figure, whose love was apparently conditional.”

Eddie blinked a few times and rubbed a thumb over Richie’s chest. “And now?”

“I don’t want to let hateful people take something away from me that brings me so much comfort. I guess I need to believe that there’s a reason for all of this, that there’s *more* after this, I guess. Believing gives life a purpose, otherwise it’s just- *we’re just*...a statistical anomaly. You know what I mean?”

Eddie nodded and breathed in the scent of Richie’s polo shirt. “Did it take you a long time to-” He let it hang.

Richie smiled and squeezed him a little tighter. “It wasn’t easy. Being out here helped, though, it gave me time to think. I was alone for a while, until I met Bill. It’s probably what kept me out of trouble, away from drugs, and all that.”

“Hm.” He closed his eyes and listened in for Richie’s heartbeat.

“Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”

“New testament?”

Richie nodded. “Corinthians.”

“I like that.”

They lay like that for a few hours, just until Eddie calmed down.

Richie had dozed off to sleep in the meantime and Eddie had succumbed to playing with his curls as he dreamt. Richie was warm. Warm chest, warm hands, warm personality. He was compassionate and sweet, he genuinely cared for people in a way Eddie had never allowed himself to; or in the way he had always been raised not to. He wanted a change he thought; he was ready for a change. He didn't want to become the bitter man he could already see himself becoming, concerned about appearances more than about his own happiness. He wanted what Richie had in a way, a freedom to explore and to love, to laugh, to try new things. Eddie thought that if he knew the future, he might ask Richie to stay.

Richie stirred in his sleep and Eddie shoved his fingers in his hair. Once Richie's eyes met his, Eddie couldn't help the smile that formed on his lips.

"Hi." Richie smiled back, blinking slowly as he adjusted to the dim lighting.

"Hey, I was hoping you'd wake up."

"I like this better." He said.

"Hm?"

"You. I like seeing you happy." He yawned. *Something has always been missing.*

Eddie was speechless for a few seconds before cleaning his throat and asking, "Are you hungry?" *Sometimes I forget life before you.*

"Yes. How are you feeling?" *I like you; I love you.*

"Better, now that you're awake." Then, before Richie could realize what he said, "I will call room service. What do you want?" *I love you.*

Richie closed his eyes and shook his head. Eddie didn't notice. "Um- Pancakes again?" *I wish you'd just-*

"Jesus, this is the least healthy week of my life." *-kiss me.*

--

How can someone so large look so helpless when they sleep? Eddie pulled the covers over Richie's curled up, sleeping body. He was flushed pink from the natural heat he radiated when he slept. Eddie wanted badly to stay curled up next to him. Waking up next to Richie had been the most wonderful thing he had gotten to experience that past week and he only had one more morning left. Monday he would be waking up next to him for the last time.

Richie made one of his soft sleepy noises and Eddie felt himself fall a little more in love. *Stop it, Edward. For your own good.*

Richie started to stir awake, his blue eyes opening up to the new day. As soon as he saw Eddie, he smiled. Eddie made a conscious effort to memorize every detail of Richie's face, just in case he missed the moment Richie woke up the next day. He wanted his sleepy face, his lax smile and those eyes imprinted into his brain like a tattoo. He had made it through the week holding on to the idea that he would forget Richie eventually after they parted ways; he understood now that he didn't want to forget. He would make the choice not to forget, and Richie wouldn't be just another guy.

"Mm... Where are you going, Eds? It's Sunday." Richie's sleepy voice was Eddie's favourite.

"Connor called. Apparently, there's been a big development on the Uris deal." He brushed Richie's hair between his fingers. "I'll be back right after lunch, maybe sooner, and then we can get ready together."

Richie's eyes widened. "Oh, the thing..."

Eddie laughed. "Yes, the thing. I don't want you to be anxious, so I'll just tell you it's a show."

Richie smiled, still out of it. "A show..."

"Yes, love, a show. Do you want to sleep some more?"

"S'more." He closed his eyes.

"Not S'more, some more."

"We should make S'mores." With that, he was fast asleep.

Eddie allowed himself a few more seconds of playing with Richie's hair. "I'm really gonna miss you." He whispered next to his ear, then he kissed the top of his head and left.

--

Eddie didn't look at Connor when he walked into the office. "Hi, Maddy."

"Mr. Kaspbrak, how was your day off yesterday?"

"Really good, thank you." He put his briefcase down and she handed him a bunch of papers he didn't bother asking about (he could read them later). "I like the haircut."

She ran her fingers through her now short hair. "Oh, thank you."

"Compliment her hair, Connor." Eddie's voice was monotone, challenging.

Connor, who had been leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, moved to sit on a chair. "Nice hair, Madison." He reached for his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

Maddy turned to face Eddie, rolled her eyes and walked out.

"A day off? For real?" Connor was fast to talk as soon as Maddy closed the door.

"Yeah, Connor. For real. Guess why I needed one."

Connor's lips tightened.

"Nothing? Good." He slumped down on the chair and lightly ran his fingers through his gelled hair. "What is this fantastic development

you couldn't wait to tell me about?"

Connor sighed and took a puff from a now lit cigarette. "Uris has gone for the banks. He's preparing to get a big loan passed, but get this, the bank is Morgan Stanley, and we both know you're a far more important client. So, I arranged for us to have a conference call with them tomorrow, right before the meeting with Uris, and we can get them to pull back on the loan. Then, Uris will have nowhere left to turn, and we'll have him on the palm of our hand."

Eddie leaned back on his chair and locked his fingers over his stomach. He did not speak. He allowed himself to think, to wonder, to consider his life as it was and think with fondness of how different it could be. It was in his hands, the power to change was his. He didn't owe anyone anything, he didn't owe anyone any explanations. He didn't want to be this anymore, this man he had become and could barely recognise. He had inadvertently become a puppet. His relationship with Rutherfurd was an extension of his own shortcomings and now, sitting across from Connor, hearing him speak like that, like Uris was an animal they had to put down, he realized how wrong it all was. He was going about life like life itself was a business exchange, and the people in it were pawns he had to move in order to advance his own position. He realized he too was a pawn in other people's chess games. *Enough. Enough now, Eddie.*

"Waiting for the ceiling to answer you, or…" Connor's fist was closed and propped up underneath his chin. Eddie remembered the look on Richie's face when he fell powerless on the grass, no longer pinned by Connor. His fist had been closed like that. He had been grabbing between Richie's legs.

Eddie took a sharp breath, shaking. He remained seated though, trying not to recall Richie's tearful apology, as if he had done anything wrong. Then, Eddie spoke, not to Connor, but to himself, like he had to be the friend *he* needed. "I first started this, because I wanted to build something."

Connor stood up. Walked to the big windows and pretended to contemplate the view. Connor was not a contemplative person.

"And *I*-" Eddie inhaled; it was sharp, there was an underlying hint of

pain in his voice. Eddie wasn't an emotional man, but he was very relieved to find out he still cared. He could still care. "-don't make anything…"

"You're such a fucking fairy, Edward. I am giving you this deal! I am literally putting this shit in front of you." Connor slammed his hands on the table, but Eddie didn't budge, didn't blink. He just sat there, so Connor sat on the chair to his left.

He couldn't look at Connor without wanting to knock his teeth out of his mouth, but he was holding back quite well, despite that. "I should have done more, by now, I could have." But what had that gotten him? What did it get him, that he would be proud to call his? Money got him to LA. Money got him to Richie. *But Richie isn't mine.* He had…*stuff*, status, an attractive young woman as a fiancée, respect from peers (although, maybe not that one as much now). But Eddie was lonely

Connor muttered something but his voice was muffled by his greeted teeth. Eddie didn't notice.

Eddie grabbed his briefcase, opened it and scanned over the same documents he had read a dozen times that week. “I'll go over these again, maybe I can do something-”

“Do…something?” Connor interrupted and stared at him bewildered. Eddie looked at him like he'd forgotten he was in the room. “Like what?” He leaned forward on the chair and stood inches away from Eddie; he could smell the cigarette smoke on him. “Edward. Call the fucking bank.”

He didn't. Instead, Eddie read over the transactions of Stan's company, profit margins, investment losses, company spending, incomes and outcomes.

“You’re going soft, it’s that fucking faggot staying with you. You're letting a boy-toy get in the way of business, of our partnership, everything. Is the head that goo-”

Eddie, who had been sitting there clenching his fists, unnoticed by Connor, grabbed his collar and pulled him within an inch of his face.

“Connor, I’m gonna say this one fucking time, so listen.” His knuckles were white. “Watch yourself.”

“Wh-”

“Do not fucking talk about him like that, do not even fucking say his name, you’re not worthy of having it in your thoughts, let alone feel it leaving your mouth.”

"You're a fucking-"

"A what, Connor?" His nails dug into his palms. "After the Uris deal is done, no matter the outcome, you're done at this company." He let go of him. "There was never a fucking partnership."

--

Richie should know by now not to stare.

"Rich?"

"Hm?" His eyes darted up towards Eddie's face, away from his chest where they had been for the past- God, who can say? Eddie probably.

Eddie smiled, a mix between pleased and shy, knowing perfectly well what got Richie distracted. "Are you okay?"

"Yea-yes. Yes. Great. What kind of show is this that it would start at four in the afternoon, on a Sunday?"

"The show starts at nine."

"Then why are we leaving so early? Please, don't say you're taking me to a fancy place to eat again, I've already forgotten what each fork is for and I'm certain Beverly will not enjoy teaching me for a second time." He spoke fast, his mouth running before his brain could catch on.

Eddie stopped suddenly, his fingers still holding on to his left sleeve cuff, now adorned with a pearl cufflink, a rose gold rim around the pearl, securing it to the back plate. "You learned the different silverware?"

Richie's cheeks flushed pink. "Um, yeah... That's super sad, right?"

"No.” He swallowed. “No, Richie, it's sweet." He smiled and looked down, shaking his head. He suddenly looked sad, but Richie couldn't pinpoint why. “Anyway, we’re leaving just on time, you’ll see. It’s a surprise.”

Richie hated surprises; he didn’t mention that. He cleared his throat. "Those are pretty."

Eddie held his right wrist up to his face and tapped the second cufflink. "These?"

Richie nodded. "Mm, they look vintage, a little."

Eddie smiled so weakly, anyone who didn't know him would miss it. "Yeah, they were my grandpa's, then my dad's."

Richie stepped closer to him, slowly, until he was only at arm's length. He didn't want to invade Eddie's space, or demand his affection, but he wanted to give him the choice to reach for him. *Eddie, if I could, if I knew you-* Then Eddie was stepping into his space, reaching up and redoing his bowtie. He made a satisfied noise once he deemed it good enough and let his hands rest on Richie's shoulders. He slid them down his arms slowly and Richie’s eyes fluttered shut.

“Ready?”

“What?” Richie asked, eyes still closed.

Eddie ran his thumbs gently over Richie’s eyelids. “Are you ready to go?” The caresses continued, first over his cheekbones, then through his lips, all the way down his jawline. When Richie opened his eyes, Eddie’s lips were parted and shiny from licking them. Richie wanted to know what they felt like, he needed to know. He was almost jealous that Eddie could taste his own lips, but Richie couldn’t. Eddie

took his hand in his. “You look really, really good.” He smiled. “Let’s go, we shouldn’t be late.”

Richie remained calm right until they stepped into the car; then, his knee started bouncing uncontrollably. Eddie noticed, placing a calming hand on Richie’s knee.

“Sorry.” Richie whispered.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just, uh, don’t do well with surprises, or not knowing where we’re going. It’s an insecurity thing. Safety, if you will.”

“Wh-”

Richie lifted his hands up in half-surrender. “It’s just habit. I trust you! It’s not that.”

Eddie’s expression softened, a sincere smile curling the corners of his mouth. “You do?”

Richie lowered his arms and lay his palm over the back of Eddie’s hand, which was still on his knee. “Of course. You’ve proven to me trustworthy, Eds.”

“We’re driving to the airport.”

Richie’s eyes widened. “What?”

Eddie smiled wider. “The show is in New York.” He locked his fingers with Richie’s and cupped Richie’s cheek with his free hand. “It’s a private plane, and we’ll have a car waiting there. We’ll drive to the Metropolitan Opera, watch the show, and come back.”

“We’re taking a private plane-”

“Yes.”

“-across the country-”

Eddie nodded. “Mhm.”

“-to see an Opera?”

“Indeed.”

Richie looked at Eddie like he’d grown a second head.

“Are you gonna tell me how annoying rich people are, again?”

“No, but- what the hell, man?”

Eddie laughed and Richie relaxed into the car seat. They held hands the whole car ride.

--

Eddie didn’t know at what point Richie had started crying, but those were definitely tears. He was never good at comforting people, didn’t find himself in that position often. Something about Richie, however, made him really want to try. So, he scooted closer to him and wrapped an arm around his middle. It was dark in the Opera house, so they didn’t have to worry about judging eyes.

The song, which Richie would later learn to be called *E lucevan le stelle,* ended abruptly. He wiped the tears quickly with the tips of his fingers and looked at Eddie, sitting close to him, an arm still tightly wrapped around him, comforting, grounding. It always made his stomach jump up to his throat when Eddie would be consciously caring with him. Richie wasn’t cared for, not really, not before this week.

“You okay?” Eddie checked, a quiet whisper in Richie’s ear.

Every hair in Richie’s body stood up, a shattering chill running down his spine. “I didn’t know it was like this.”

“The music?”

Richie nodded and Eddie smiled in response, pressing a discreet kiss

to his temple.

“Richie…” He nudged the side of his head with his nose.

“Hm?” He kept his eyes fixated on the stage, teary and a shade of blue Eddie was sure would haunt him for the rest of his life. Every time he looked at the sky, or every trip he took to the seaside…from then on, Richie would be all he could see.

“Look at me.” He did. “I’m really happy you’re here.”

“Happy to be.” Richie bumped their foreheads in a quick movement, only for a second, avoiding any curious eyes. It was sincere, probably the most he’d ever been.

When the show came to its dramatic ending, Richie jumped up from his seat, applauding and sniffling. Eddie joined him. Richie’s happiness was intoxicating, and Eddie wanted to bathe in it, to memorize the curve of Richie’s lips, the wrinkles near his eyes, his smile lines. Eddie was so gone for him. He knew this; he would rather die than do anything about it. Some lines you don’t cross.

It was stupid. Eddie had been outed in front of every important person he knew in LA, and if he knew upper class gossip – and he did – he was sure everyone in New York had at least heard something about it already (these things were never kept secret). And after all of that, he was still scared. Scared to open himself up to love, to the possibility of actual, and attainable, happiness, to Richie.

He wanted to. He wanted to believe he could change the course of his life, but it felt too easy. It would be easy for Eddie to change the way his company conducted business. It would be easy for him to bring Uris’s company out of the gutter and help it re-flourish. It would be easy for him to ask Richie to stay, to tell him *Yes, I fell in love with you. I fell in love with you the second I heard you singing in that tub the first morning, and I want that for the rest of my life.* It would be so easy, would it not?

But life wasn’t easy, not real life at least. So, it had to be nothing but

wishful thinking. It had to be all in Eddie's head. In real life, he wasn't meant to be happy. He was quiet during the drive to the airport and relieved when they got to the plane and Richie curled into a ball and fell asleep as soon as they took off.

--

Richie was standing in the bathroom, watching himself closely in the mirror as he tried to understand the burning sensation deep in his chest. This had been, without a doubt, the best week of his life. He shouldn't feel this way, he shouldn't feel so loved, and yet...

He hated himself for feeling this way and Bill would surely be yelling at him if he found out. He was supposed to be good at this, he was supposed to know to keep his distance, to not share details of his life. It was bound to happen though. You can't live with someone for a week and not have a conversation. Plus, Eddie was easy to talk to. Richie wanted to hear every word he had to say, to memorize his preferred expressions and mannerisms and the way he struggled to hide his smile.

Sometimes, Eddie would look to the side mid conversation, pondering his words, thinking hard to himself, and Richie would feel the urge to turn his face back to him and caress away the folds between his eyebrows with his thumbs. He shouldn't be in love, everything he had learned over the years said he shouldn't be in love, but he was. He was. He didn't want to be. Maybe in a different version of this story he would be happy, and his affection would be returned by Eddie, but not in his version.

He took a deep breath and worked up the courage to leave the bathroom. It was dark in the penthouse, only the bedside table lamp was on. Eddie was sitting against the headboard, the covers pulled up to his hips. His face was leaning to the side and his expression was soft, rested. He had fallen asleep.

Richie approached him slowly, trying his best not to wake him. He

sat on the verge of the bed, and his breathing became erratic. He was so beautiful, even in his sleep, pale and serene, freckles covering his nose and cheeks, speckled all over his shoulders and down his upper arms, and Richie...Richie didn't notice he was leaning in until his lips were pressing onto Eddie's, gingerly and soft, barely touching at all.

Then, Eddie's hand was wrapping around the back of Richie's neck and he was done for. Eddie leaned up from the bedframe, pressing harder against his lips, trying to gain access to Richie's mouth, wanting more, needing to deepen the kiss. Richie whined against his mouth when Eddie licked over his lips and parted them.

He had taken a gamble kissing Eddie, hoping he wouldn't wake up, but Eddie did wake up, and he was kissing him back. Neither of them said anything, neither of them wanted to address what this could mean: but they could both feel it.

Richie didn't want to pull away, he never wanted to stop kissing Eddie now that he started, now that he knew he was allowed to. Eddie's fingers were tangled in Richie's hair when he pulled back, their lips parting with a wet noise.

"Eddie…" He whispered.

Eddie ran his steady hands down Richie's sides, reaching the hem of his t-shirt and pulling it up. Richie lifted his arms and let Eddie remove it for him. Eddie tossed it onto the tile floor and Richie was quick to find his lips again, his turn now to hold Eddie's face in his hands, pulling him close.

Eddie leaned forward, pushing Richie onto his back and falling down with him. Like this, on top of him, he could kiss him deeper, he could kiss him with his whole body. He wanted to touch all of him. Richie thought he'd feel electrified if Eddie kissed him, but that wasn't what happened. Instead, he felt calm, safe, like that's where he was meant to be, like he had kissed Eddie a million times before.

Richie rest his hands against Eddie's chest and Eddie responded by leaving a trail of soft wet kisses all over Richie's face and neck. "Richie-" Eddie's voice was warm and thick. "I want-" He kissed his lips harder.

"Touch me." Richie brushed their noses together. "Make love to me."

Eddie kissed him slow and pulled down his pants, those too were thrown on the floor. Richie wrapped his legs tight around his hips and his arms around his neck. He bucked his hips and grinded against Eddie, coaxing a small moan from him. Eddie smiled against his lips and rubbed against Richie as well, nothing separating them except for the fabric of their boxers.

Eddie groaned and leaned his forehead against Richie's chest. He kissed his lips again. Richie felt dizzy. "Wait, let me get the-" Eddie shifted so he could reach the nightstand. When he turned back around, Richie was changing his position and preparing to face away from him. Eddie placed a warm hand on his thigh. "No, I-" Eddie blushed, then he pressed forward and locked their lips together once more. He couldn't stop. "I want to-" *I want to be able to kiss you.* "I don't want it like that."

Richie flushed pink from his cheeks to his collarbones. Eddie guided him on the mattress, laying Richie on his side. He opened the lube bottle for the second time that week and thought about the first time they tried this, and how poorly it went. Richie's fists were clenched tight and that made Eddie pause. He placed a calming palm on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Richie nodded, but Eddie didn't seem convinced. "It's just- Please, don't think I don't want this. I do."

Eddie smiled softly and waited.

"Remember when I said I sometimes...dissociate? Sort of?"

"Yes."

"It happens more often when it's like this, when it's-" He sighs. "Sometimes I can control it, I can force myself to be present, but other times, I just...go away."

"Richie, we don't have t-"

"I trust you. I told you earlier tonight that I trust you and I meant it. I've...I've meant every single word I've said to you since we've met,

Eddie."

"Did you- did you dissociate with me?" He looked down, then back into his eyes.

"Only the first time. I promise. I-" He smiled, more to himself than at Eddie. "I wanted to feel the other ones. I want it with this one. I want this, I want you."

Eddie's lips broke into a faint smile. "I think you already have me."

"So, touch me." Richie reached for him, holding his cheek in his palm. Eddie leaned against it and kissed Richie's wrist.

Not much about prepping an ass for anal sex is romantic, but it was still the most intimate thing Richie had ever experienced. He usually prepped himself before going out every night, and he didn't have sex outside of his job at all, so he didn't know what it would feel like to have someone else do it for him. No surprise when Eddie turned out to have magical fingers and an intimate knowledge of Richie's insides.

Richie was breaking apart with nothing but Eddie's fingers inside of him, but he needed more, he needed to touch Eddie, needed to feel him on top of him. He wanted to kiss him again.

"Okay?" Eddie checked in.

Richie nodded, a broken moan escaping his lips. He was still in foetal position with his back turned to Eddie. Eddie kissed the middle of his back and his shoulder, moving to the side of his neck. Richie exhaled and started to shake. Eddie wrapped an arm around him from the back and rolled him onto his back. Immediately, Richie searched for his lips.

Eddie kissed him, soft and open, and Richie was putty underneath him. Eddie rolled on top of him and Richie looked up into his dark eyes, pupils blown, lips parted and wet, cheeks flushed pink. Eddie's body felt hot to the touch.

Their dicks were getting stimulated by the grinding of their naked bodies and the rubbing of their stomachs. Richie's stomach was

quickly wet with Eddie's pre-cum. Richie looked down and his chest hurt with how much he wanted to have Eddie inside of him. He leaned his head back on the pillow, exposing his neck and jawline, and he started grinding faster and harder against Eddie.

Eddie kissed up his jawline and moaned into his neck. "Can I-"

"Yes. Please. Please, Eddie."

Eddie reached for a condom and rolled it down his shaft, ignoring how wet his dick was. He repositioned himself and waited as Richie spread his legs. He looked down and guided his cock to Richie's hole. Richie inhaled deeply, held it in, then he exhaled as Eddie slowly pushed inside of him. Eddie closed his eyes, the tight fit of Richie around him wrecking him.

Eddie found the hand Richie had been using to grab the sheet and locked their fingers together. "Still with me?" He squeezed his hand.

Richie nodded and kept his breathing steady as he adjusted to Eddie inside him. "I'm with you."

Eddie lay a chaste kiss to his lips. "Ready?"

Once he got a positive response from Richie, he pulled out halfway and thrust into him again. Richie wrapped himself tighter around him, hiding his face between his neck and shoulder. Eddie picked up the pace pretty quickly after that, bruising Richie's lips with sloppy wet kisses. Richie held onto Eddie's hand, squeezing tight.

When Eddie hit the right spot inside of Richie, he scratched down his back and clenched around him. Eddie smiled against his lips. "There?"

"Yes." Richie moaned, frantic. "Yes."

Eddie's orgasm began to build up, coming with deeper and sharper thrusts. "Fuck-" He grunted. He let go of Richie's hand and held himself up on both elbows, hands on the sides of Richie's head and fingertips brushing his face, holding it in place. "Look at me, stay with me." *Stay with me now, stay with me tomorrow, stay, stay, stay.*

Richie looked into his eyes and watched Eddie as he moaned, sweat building in his forehead, cheeks red, breath out of control. His own orgasm was building up too, the rubbing of their stomachs stimulating his dick as Eddie thrust into him.

"Richie, I'm gonna-"

"Cum for me. Cum for me, baby." He held him tight, hand on the back of his neck and playing with his hair.

Eddie came mid-thrust, losing his control completely and bottoming out deeply inside of Richie. Richie hissed at the hard hit to his prostate, then Eddie, still out of breath and dazed, reached down and wrapped his fingers around him. The hiss turned into a deep and surprised moan when Eddie began jerking him off. He was still inside of him, and the overstimulation was almost too much for both men.

In the end, it only took a few pumps for Richie to cum underneath Eddie, spilling over both of their stomachs. Eddie pulled out with a satisfied sigh, removed his condom and knotted it. He collapsed on top of Richie, exhausted and warm.

"Are you okay?" He asked, peeking up at Richie as he lied on his chest.

Richie nodded and ran his fingernails up and down his back in soft circle-like motions. "Do you want to sleep, love?"

Eddie kissed his chest once, twice, three times, then traced his jawline and held himself up on his elbow. Reaching up and down, he kissed his lips again. Richie wondered to himself if that would be the last time.

"We should clean up."

They took a shower together a few minutes later, exchanging looks and smiles, holding each other under the hot water. Richie allowed himself to feel good that night.

The room was illuminated by the soft blue light that came through

the window. LA's night sky, arriving just in time to shine the moon down on Richie, as he laid in the comfortable bed for the last night. Eddie felt overwhelmed, unsure of what was causing that tightness in his chest, if it was the wholeness of that week coming down on him at last, or the realization that *he had just made love to Richie.* He had looked into his eyes and kissed his lips.

It was quiet over soft and timed breaths. And then, *I love you.* Gentle, yet certain. Eddie opened his eyes slowly, Richie's back still pressed against his chest, wide and warm and vulnerable. Open and welcoming, just waiting for Eddie to decide to walk in and accept the offer. He maintained his breathing, allowing Richie to keep that moment for himself.

Eddie knew at once that he wasn't meant to have heard those words, that Richie believed him to be asleep when he decided to whisper them. Still, he wondered why he had said them. Richie was leaving the next day, he couldn't mean them. But what if he did? What did that mean for Eddie? Where did that leave him? *An impossible love.*

He resolved in that moment, before drifting to sleep, that he would not allow himself to feel this way towards Richie, no matter how badly he wanted him back (and he knew he wanted him back, loved him back).

He was still holding him tightly in his arms, when he closed his eyes, and the confession still hung in the air, ripe and unpicked.

Notes for the Chapter:

You can find me on twitter HERE

Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

> Welcome to the finale!
>
> Content Warnings: physical assault, choking, threat of rape, homophobia and slurs, mention of rape, description of masturbation.
>
> I hope you enjoy this last chapter and feel as much reading it as I felt writing it.
>
> <3

Richie didn't have a right to feel hurt and confused when Eddie dodged a kiss and pretended not to notice. This wasn't a relationship, this was a business deal, and Richie had no one to blame but himself for believing otherwise for a second.

Eddie left early for his meeting with Stan, leaving the younger man alone in the penthouse. "I'm a fucking idiot." Richie sat on the bed, elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. "What did you think was gonna happen, Richard? You thought he'd want you? You're still a prostitute." He argued with himself, voice muffled by his hands. Served him right for believing he could have this, for believing he deserved to have someone like Eddie.

He began repackaging his clothes back into the shopping bags.

--

Eddie was sitting across from Stan, as Connor ran his mouth about nothing. He was full of shit, and it only took a decade for Eddie to realize it. Better late than never. He looked across the table and one corner of his mouth curled into a small smile. "Gentlemen, would you leave Mr. Uris and I alone, please?" Eddie announced.

The men all looked at each other, mouths open and confused. They all stood up, however. All except Connor. "You too, Connor." Eddie added.

"Oh, Edward-"

Eddie put his hands in his pockets and stood there, head high. He needn't ask again, Connor left along with Stan's team. The door closed, leaving only Eddie and Stan inside.

"What's your angle here, Kaspbrak?"

There was a small file cabinet near the back of the room. Eddie opened it and from it produced a bottle of expensive scotch and two glasses. He held one of the glasses up at eye level and gave Stan a nod. Stan accepted the offer.

"Trying to soften me with a drink?"

Eddie chuckled and poured them two fingers. He liked Stan. "If you had the money to save your company, what would your plan for it be? If you have one." He handed him the glass.

Stan took it, having to make a conscious effort not to let it shake in his hand. Eddie noticed. "I'm not trying to put you on the spot, Stanley." He meant that. "I just want to know if you have a plan, or if I will have to put together a team for this."

Stan's eyes widened behind the cup, almost choking as he took a sip. "What are you talking about, Kaspbrak?"

Eddie held out his hand. "If we're gonna do this, you have to call me Eddie." *Not Edward?* The voice in his head asked. *Shut up.* He replied.

Stan shook his hand firmly. "Thank you, Eddie." He smiled, eyes glistening. "Thank you."

Eddie smiled and nodded. "Good. Okay, let's call the others inside."

When Eddie and Stan announced to the room that they were going to become partners, that Eddie was buying stocks at Stan’s company, and investing 200 million dollars on it to help bring it back up,

Connor went red, the vein on the side of his forehead throbbing. Stan's team was shocked but happy, congratulating both men.

Connor pulled Eddie aside by his forearm. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"What I should do. It's the right thing, Connor."

"The right th-" He grabbed Eddie's arm harder. "Are you fucking insane? Edward, come on."

"Oh, that reminds me." Eddie leaned in and got really close to Eddie's ear. "You're fired." He shook Stan's and all of his team members' hands, packed his briefcase and left the meeting room leaving Connor wide eyed and speechless behind him. "Oh, Maddy, by the way." He stopped at the entrance and turned to the young girl. "I'm going to need more from you from now on, because I will be conducting business here in LA."

"Sir?"

"So, how does a promotion sound?"

Her mouth hung open. "I- Yes, yes. Thank you!"

Eddie smiled. "Good, we'll talk about that, then. Take the rest of the day off and make sure Mr. Bowers leaves before you do."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you." With that, he left.

For once, Eddie did something that fed his soul and not someone's wallet, and he felt good. He felt like a person, for the first time in a long time. After the meeting he drove down to the same park he had gone to with Richie. It wasn't as sunny now as it had been then, but it was still nice out, despite a few more clouds decorating the sky.

Richie told him he loved him. He wasn't supposed to hear him, but he did. Now what? Was he supposed to forget about it? Pretend he

didn’t love him back? Richie was leaving, Eddie had to let him. That was the deal, right? Eddie said it to him that first morning, didn’t he? *Three thousand dollars, one week. And then, Richie, I will let you leave*.

Eddie wanted to tell him, but he knew he couldn’t bring himself to. He didn’t know what was waiting for him in New York or the amount of salvaging he would have to do. He had to talk to Myra, he had responsibilities. Besides, did he expect Richie to move across the country for him? Would he want to move to LA himself and leave everything he knew behind? It wouldn't work. It wasn't meant to be, and Eddie would learn to live with that.

Richie had already finished packing when someone knocked on the door. Eddie had a room key (obviously), so Richie was suspicious. He thought about not opening, but worried it was an emergency, so he got up from the couch and walked to the door. When he opened it, he really fucking wished he hadn't.

"Where's Edward?" Richie looked over Connor's shoulder, worried. "Did something happen to him?"

"Oh, something definitely happened to him." He sneered, pushing Richie inside by force. "You happened to him."

Richie took several steps back, trying to distance himself from Connor who had slammed the door shut. "I-" The sentence got caught in his throat. He could already feel himself paralyzing and he couldn't stand it. This was the thing he hated the most about himself.

"He just fired me. I suppose you had something to do with that, didn't you? You fucking fairy."

In a split second, Richie was on the floor, bleeding out of his mouth. He didn't see the punch coming and he had barely begun to process it when Connor was suddenly straddling him and pinning him to the floor. He grabbed Richie's face with one hand, squeezing it hard.

Richie was bleeding and squirming under him. "Stop! Let me *go*!"

"Maybe I'll fuck you and I won't care about losing a billion dollars,

how does that sound?" Connor moved his hand to Richie's neck and choked him, the back of his head slamming against the floor with an instant headache.

Richie couldn't breathe, saliva spilling from the corners of his mouth as he struggled to get Connor off of him. When Richie's arms started to grow limp, he heard something slamming, footsteps, and then Connor was being flung off of him.

Eddie grabbed Connor by the collar. "What did I say, Connor?" He punched him and Connor went down. Eddie was on top of him just as fast. "What did I say?" He punched him again, then again, then again. "Do. Not. Touch. H-"

Richie put a hand on his shoulder and Eddie jumped, but stopped. Richie pulled him back and off of Connor, whose white shirt was now a deep shade of red at the collar. Connor pat his nose with his sleeve. "You fucking broke my nose."

"And I'll break your fucking arm next. Get out." Eddie took a step towards him, menacing. He didn't have to shout, he barely had to speak. "Out."

Eddie was vibrating in place. Connor stood up and cleaned the blood with his sleeve. “You’re gonna regret this, Kaspbrak.”

“I fucking doubt that.” Eddie spat.

Connor scoffed and pointed at Richie, like he was making a promise. Or a threat. Then he stumbled his way to the door and left.

Eddie held Richie’s face in his hands and the taller man hissed. “Let me see, Rich.” He asked, voice soft.

“I’m okay. It was nothing.”

Eddie tilted Richie’s chin up and the mark around his neck was clearly visible. Richie’s eyes darted to Eddie’s knuckles; blood splattered on them. “I’m gonna go wash my hands, and we’re gonna get you some ice for that lip, okay?” His thumb caressed behind his ear.

Richie nodded and moved to the couch as Eddie went towards the bathroom. When he came back to Richie, he was holding a glass with ice cubes in one hand and a cloth in another.

"What's the cloth for?"

"So you don't get an ice burn."

He sat next to him, one leg stretched out on the couch and behind Richie's back. He carefully placed a few ice cubes inside the cloth and folded it. Eddie leaned forward and pressed it against Richie's busted bottom lip. Richie hissed and wrapped his fingers around Eddie's forearm.

"I'm sorry…"

"It's okay, it's helping."

"Not for this, for-" His eyes darted to Richie's, but he looked away just as quickly. "I'm just sorry. You deserve better."

"So you keep saying." Richie ran two fingers carefully over Eddie's knuckles, still red. They wouldn't go back to normal for a couple days. "You should ice your hand, too."

"I will."

"He said that you, um- Did you not get the deal with Stan?"

"I made a deal with Stan. Just not the one Connor wanted me to."

"You're gonna help him, aren't you?" Richie smiled knowingly. Eddie hoped he was proud of him, then he wondered why. "I'm proud of you, Eddie."

"You are?" He looked at him, the lines of his face soft.

"Mm." He caressed his knuckles one more time. "You should be too."

Before Eddie could offer him an answer, Richie stood up.

“Are you okay?” Eddie asked, not wanting to pressure Richie.

“Yeah, I just-” He inhaled and looked around him. “I should get going. I was just waiting for you to get back, so I could say goodbye.”

“Right.” Eddie kept his cool, his face gave nothing away. “Of course.” He stood up as well, reaching for the envelope on the inside of his jacket. He took it out and held it out to Richie.

Richie smiled and shook his head. “No, it’s okay.”

“What?” Eddie’s voice held a smile in it, like he didn’t understand what Richie was saying.

“I can’t accept it, Eddie.”

“Richie, we had a deal, please.”

“Keep it, okay? I’ll be alright.” He began turning around.

“Rich-” He braced himself. “Stay. Tonight. Stay.”

Richie looked everywhere but at Eddie, resting on the ceiling for a few seconds. Then he took a deep breath, and another one. “I can’t.”

“Richie, this doesn’t have to-” *What’s wrong with me?* “This doesn’t have to be goodbye.”

“We both know that’s not realistic.”

“I’m gonna be coming here a lot more now, you know?” He stepped closer.

“And what, Edward?” The name sounded wrong in his lips. “You’re gonna come cruising Hollywood Boulevard, looking for me? Offer to pay me for another week?”

“No…” He was quiet. “No. Not like that, I-” He took a deep breath. “Richie, my life is about to become a mess, I have no idea what’s waiting for me in New York.”

“I know.” He did, he really did. “Exactly.”

Eddie knew, with that, that it was over. He had to let him go too. He

dropped his shoulders. “Then, take the money, please.”

Richie shook his head. He closed the distance between them and pressed his lips against Eddie’s forehead and Eddie’s hand was quickly on his chest, feeling his heartbeat for the last time. “I had a really good time.”

"Will you promise me something?"

Richie looked down at him. *I love you so much, it hurts.* “Yes?”

"Take up space.” Eddie looked up at him like he hoped Richie would be able to know everything he was feeling from nothing but his eyes. “Be big. Make yourself heard. You're too smart, Richie. You're too bright. Don’t let LA swallow you whole." *It kills me. I want to kiss you and it kills me.*

“Be good.” Richie smiled. “You’re a better man than you allow people to see.”

That was the last time they spoke.

--

Coming back home was weird. Walking his street in his new clothes was weird. He was not looking forward to hearing Bill lose his mind about Richie coming back without money. He opened the door to the small apartment and could immediately spot Bill passed out on the bed. "Of course." He walks slowly inside, setting down all of his bags. Once he reaches the bed, he places a hand on Bill's shoulder and shakes him awake. "Bill." He checked his pupils and shook him again. "Wake up, asshole."

Richie sighed and walked to the fridge, finding it empty. "Bill. For fucks sake." He closed the fridge door and let his forehead fall on it with a thud. He started regretting not taking the money, but he knew he couldn't have accepted it, not when he was in love with Eddie. It wouldn't have been right.

"Rich?" A voice called from the bed.

Richie leaned away from the fridge and took a step back. "Did you know you have no food in the house?"

"I haven't been here all week, man." His voice was hoarse. "Whatever, you have a bunch of money on you, we can buy food."

Richie looked at his feet and hunched his shoulders.

"What?" Bill asked. Then his eyes widened. "What the fuck did you do to the money?"

"There's no money."

"What do you mean there's no money?" He pulled the covers off of him and sat up on the bed.

"I didn't accept it."

Bill looked confused. "You didn't accept it? The payment for a week of work?"

"Yeah." Richie opened the fridge and closed it again. He paced in a circle.

"Oh no."

"Hm?" He looked up.

"Richie."

"What?" He greeted his teeth.

"You fell in love with him."

Richie rolled his eyes. "I did not fall in love with him."

"Sure. Did you kiss him? On the mouth?"

Richie crossed his arms and looked to the side.

"What the fuck?" Bill fell back on the bed.

"I didn't fall in love with him. I just…I like him."

"And you lost us 3000 dollars in the process."

"That was my decision to make, Bill. Not yours. It wasn't our money, it was mine."

Bill gaped and then his face shifted into something angry. "Is that so?"

"Yeah, Bill. Yeah."

Bill stood up, got dressed and, without saying a word, he left. Richie wondered if Bill had purposefully ignored the bruising on his lips and neck, if he didn't care or if he genuinely hadn't even noticed.

Richie felt an urge to sob. He bit his tongue and dragged his feet on the floor, falling on the bed once he was within reach. His chest felt tight and his limbs heavy, reminding him he was back home. The anxiety that had followed him since he was 17 years old came back in full swing; and too did a new and overwhelming amount of self-hatred.

He'd learned to manage his panic attacks years before and now felt grateful for it, as he learned that the one currently making its way into his nervous system might actually kill him, or at least incapacitate him for a few days.

He didn't regret the past week; it had been fun playing house and pretending he was worth more than the world had constantly told him he ever would. He had almost forgotten he would have to eventually come back down from the clouds. He had barely stuck the landing.

Lying alone in the small bed he had shared with Bill for the past decade only made it more obvious to him how much he missed Eddie and the warmth of his body against his own. He had been away from Eddie before, during the week whenever he left for work, but it was different now. He wouldn't be walking through the door in a few hours.

Richie rubbed his face and stared at the ceiling. *I'm sorry I didn't stay. It's just that I'm in love with you and prolonging it knowing I'd still have to leave would have ended me.* He fell asleep clutching a pillow.

--

Eddie couldn't sleep that night, restless and ridden with a hundred different regrets. He left Richie's side of the bed empty, as if something inside him was hoping for Richie to knock on the door any minute now. He wondered if he had gotten home safely, if he had gone to sleep early, if he was out in Hollywood Boulevard, then remembered it was none of his business. Richie's private life was none of his business.

"I miss you." He mouthed inaudibly into his pillow. He moved further towards the centre of the bed and caressed Richie's empty side of the mattress with his thumb. Tomorrow he would take his private plane back to NYC and go home, to a fiancée he wasn't sure he still had. Tomorrow he would start picking up the broken pieces of his life and attempt to put them together without glue.

His suitcases were packed and waiting for him in the car. Everything was in order. Eddie checked himself in the mirror one last time and tried not to overthink his choice not to wear a tie too much. The driver, Cole, was expecting him in ten minutes. Eddie left the penthouse, saying goodbye to the walls and all they had heard and seen that week. He left any thoughts of Richie behind the door.

Beverly was waiting for him at the reception and met him with a sympathetic smile. Once he handed in the key and closed the account Beverly wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"Unprofessional, Miss Marsh."

"Fuck you, you're my best friend. You're technically not a guest here anymore."

Eddie laughed, wrapping his arms around her in a soft embrace.

"Don't be a stranger too long, okay? Come by for a visit, you can be

in LA for something other than work, you know?" She squeezed him tight and let go.

"I know. I'll try to. You could come to New York, it wouldn't hurt."

"I hate that fucking place."

"Don't we all." He mocked.

"So, how about Richie?"

Eddie stopped breathing for a few seconds until he finally inhaled deeply. "What about him?"

"I *saw* you this week, Edward. I've never seen you that happy and I've known you for over twenty years."

Eddie looked to the side and shook his head. "I can't, Bev. Okay?"

"Do you think life is easy for anyone?"

"What?" He looked confused; eyebrows furrowed.

"Do you think it was easy for me to choose not to marry, to leave the comfort of my parent's house, to say no to the money and security, just so I could live my fucking life the way I wanted to live it?"

"Bev-"

"Edward."

"It's different-"

"The part you were afraid to do is done already. You were outed. It happened. And look at that? The world didn't fucking implode around you. You still have a company, you're still a millionaire. None of your business partners cared and you know why?"

Eddie stayed watching her, eyes shiny.

"Because they'd lose more by casting you out. So, they're gonna ignore it. Sure, they might not accept your sexuality, but they're not gonna do shit about it, except maybe talk behind your back. And you

never cared about that your whole life, I doubt you'll start now."

She was right, although Eddie had never known Beverly Marsh to be wrong.

"I don't think I c-"

"You can." She held him by the elbows and pulled him in for another hug, this time to say goodbye. "Promise me you'll at least try."

Eddie smiled and with a kiss to her cheek, he said goodbye.

He slept on the flight to New York.

--

He had always been the only man she could see herself marrying. He had always been the only man she would ever consider. She knew this because her father had thrown several of them in her direction over the years, always talking about how women of her calibre needed a husband, needed to be taken care of, claimed, or else they weren't considered respectable. Myra had never felt like the marriage kind.

Edward had never been anything but courteous towards her since the day they'd met. A good man and fully uninterested in her private matters or in controlling her. A good compromise. Her father had practically been planning their union since before Myra had turned 21 years old.

She wouldn't lie about it - she had been attracted to Edward when they had first met. He was older, but he was attractive, charming, serious and unfathomably rich. However, by the time they got engaged, just before Myra had turned 28, any infatuation had disappeared from lack of connection, both emotional and physical.

Why had Myra said yes, if this was the case? Her boyfriend Tommy was 29, an artist and black. Her father would never approve of it, the

racist, classist fuck, but Myra was in love, and marrying Edward offered the perfect cover. Marrying Edward was her chance to be free.

So, when her father called screaming about Edward being *a word starting with 'f' that Myra didn't feel comfortable repeating*, it all made sense. His distance, the sleeping in separate bedrooms, his indifference to her late rendezvous with Tommy (because *There's no way he doesn't know about those.*), the surprise marriage proposal that came 18 months after they had already decided they didn't like each other like that, and the fact that Edward was her friend. He had never suggested he would want to be anything but her friend, someone to talk to.

In a lot of ways, him and Myra had been the same all along, both trying to belong, out of place in their own home and life, both hiding their truth. They were both perfectly aware of the power Harry Rutherfurd held over New York City and Myra remembered in detail the way she had come to learn it. She had been in high school still when her father paid the New York DA's office hush money to bury a rape charge against her older brother. She could still taste the bile that had crept up from deep in her stomach and climbed up her oesophagus. A few years later, she managed to track down the victim and anonymously donate ten thousand dollars. Even then, she knew that it wasn't enough. Now more than ever she knew it never would be.

What do you do when you learn that 1) your brother is a rapist and 2) your father covered it up? What do you do except question what would happen if it had been you? What do you do when you grow up and realize that this is the way men in your life and social circle view women and girls? Like things to use and silence?

In Myra's case, you go to college and get an education and vow that you will do something, *anything*. You make promises to yourself that you will be independent and a fighter, that you will help change the world. Then...you don't. You grow older and you hold yourself in contempt. You settle for what the world has dealt you and you say it could be worse. Because it could. Because you're white and rich and the world was built for you, you can afford to settle, you can afford to be content. And you lower yourself. And you lower yourself. And

you lower yourself. Until you're right where they want you to be.

Myra couldn't judge Edward, it would be hypocritical of her, and neither him nor her appreciated hypocrisy. They had both fallen victims to their own lifestyles and now it was time to deal with the aftermath. In the end, Myra knew this was their chance to take a step back, see the bigger picture and realize the lives they had been leading weren't making them happy. They deserved better, both of them. She hoped he would be able to see it that way too.

Edward opened the door to their apartment. First, she heard his footsteps, then the suitcases. Then "Myra?"

She leaned against the living room door frame and stayed under the threshold. She didn't know what she expected, but the look of sadness in Edward's eyes was not it. He looked lost, like he barely knew how he got there. Immediately, she knew he needed her to be his friend, and *that* she knew how to do. Friendship was the only thing that felt natural between them.

She walked up to him at a steady pace and wrapped her arms around him, holding the back of his neck (a touch she found comforting for herself and hoped he'd find comforting as well). "Oh, Edward, darling. What happened?"

Edward pulled away from her. "Did you speak to your father?" His voice was thick.

Myra had never known Edward to be an emotional person. Men who cried weren't viewed with kind eyes in their circle, especially not around her father. This was a side of Edward she hadn't met. He looked...heartbroken.

"I did, but I want to hear it from you. It's not his version of events that matters to me."

She guided him to the couch pretty quickly after that. He finally calmed down enough to tell her about his upbringing, the unfiltered version this time. He told her about his mother's suffocating parenting, raising him to live in her shadow, to be just another part of her business. She never saw him as his own person, Edward knew

that, but it still hurt to say it out loud and recognize it in front of other people.

He told her about being gay (she didn't fake surprise), about the first time he got beat up for it after leaving a secret gay bar in the 70s, about coming out to his roommate in college and finding out he put in a request to change rooms, about getting a second roommate and having his first gay experience with him. He told her about the hiding, the secret hand holding, all the guys in his life who made him feel like a dirty secret, until he had internalized it well enough to do it to other men himself.

Myra simply listened, attentive and quiet. She had learned the importance of listening to marginalized communities from Tommy, of validating their experiences, good and bad, their trauma, their fears. She couldn't and wouldn't pretend to understand, to know what it was like, but she could listen, and she could hold his hand.

Then, Edward got to the events of the past week. He told her about the guy that stayed with him - Richie -, about what Connor did to him (Myra had never liked Connor), about being outed and about the visit from her father. He told her he fell in love with Richie and she smiled faintly. *That* she could relate to.

So, she told him her side in return. From being raised to be a pretty face and taught to marry well and rich, to betraying her own dreams after college. From accepting to marry Edward to appease her family and gain independence, to meeting Tommy. Edward smiled as she told him about her boyfriend.

"Where is Richie now?" She asked.

Eddie swallowed, leaning back on their couch. "I don't know. In LA, somewhere."

"What are you gonna do about it?"

"What do you mean?"

"He told you he loved you." She said it like it was obvious what the next move was.

Edward was quiet for a moment. "I can't do this, Myra. I'm 41, I can't upend my entire life for him."

"That sounds like the perfect age to upend your life." She offered in brutal honesty.

Edward laughed. "Were you always like this?"

Myra smiled at him. "Yeah, I just got lost for a little while."

They stayed quiet, enjoying each other's company. Then Myra stood up and started pacing.

"I feel...crazy."

Edward sat up straight.

"I'm gonna tell my dad about Tommy, I have to. I want him, I want a life with him. I don't want him to be a secret, he deserves more than that. I'm gonna tell him and, God, he's probably gonna disown me but I don't care. I don't care." She dropped her shoulders and walked to the couch again, kneeling fully on top of it and facing the man who was now officially her former fiancé. "Edward, the worst is done. Consensually or not, you are out now. It's up to you to decide how you want to live your life from now on."

He stared at her, then at the ceiling. "I think you owe yourself some happiness."

Edward slammed the back of his head against the couch and closed his eyes, envisioning a future that was just out-of-reach, but at arm's length.

--

So, Eddie ended up not doing anything about it. Well, that's not true. He did a lot, just not in the love department.

After their talk, Myra moved out. She spoke to her family and told them the truth - she didn't want to marry Eddie, she loved someone else, she hated living a double life. As she predicted, her father, Harry, disowned her, and blamed Eddie on top of it all for *introducing his child to sin*. Eddie laughed about it with her later that day.

Interestingly, ending their engagement helped their friendship. Eddie would often meet Myra and Tommy for dinner at their tiny New York apartment and learned that Tommy was a self-taught cook on top of being a talented painter. When Eddie found out Tommy was saving to go to art-school, he promptly gave him the money to cover tuition. Tommy accepted only because Eddie agreed on letting him pay him back later; Eddie knew already he would never accept the money.

When it came to work, Eddie did have to pay Connor Bowers a large amount of money for firing him without notice, but he would have paid whatever if it meant he would never have to work with him for another second. Stan and Eddie built a team together, specifically to get Stan's company back on its feet; Stan was taking care of the LA office, while Eddie focused on their New York branch.

He did end up promoting Maddy, offering her a much larger paycheck for a few more work responsibilities and an increase in her work hours. She was still in Los Angeles and divided her time between assisting the Uris-Kaspbrak team and working as a point of contact between Eddie and any possible client in town. Whatever business Eddie had in LA, she was his most trusted employee.

He started donating a lot of his money. He donated to shelters, AIDS research and treatment, orphanages, homeless aid, and the one that meant the most to him, the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Manhattan. He didn't need it and he knew it would make no difference in his lifestyle but could make all the difference in other people's lives.

Eddie *was* living as an out gay man; he just wasn't interested in dating. At all. This was absolutely fine and normal. It had been three months since he'd last seen Richie. He was fine. He didn't miss him anymore. Really. He only thought about him whenever he passed a park, had pancakes, listened to his Opera records, slept. He still moaned his name when he touched himself. He was fine.

So, Eddie did do a lot with his life after leaving the Beverly Hotel. Just not in the love department. Just not about Richie and the fact he was very much in love with him.

--

Less than a week after Eddie left LA, Richie moved out of his and Bill's apartment, crashing on friends' couches until he could afford to rent something for and by himself.

The falling out between Bill and Richie seemed inevitable in hindsight. Bill believed he was entitled to a cut of the 3000 dollars and accused Richie of lying about not accepting the money, claiming he was hiding it. Richie understood Bill wasn't the man he'd met years before; the drugs had changed him. He also understood that, after years of taking care of his friend and trying to get him clean, he couldn't go down with him. Richie was taking care of himself for once. It was time he stopped making excuses.

Going back on the streets was hard. It happened a couple of days after leaving Bill, when Richie finally ran out of money. On the first night, Richie hadn't managed to get picked up, probably due to being new on that strip. He was forced to change his location after the argument with Bill, not wanting to share a strip of pavement with him night after night.

On the second night, however, Mike, the last guy he'd seen before meeting Eddie, showed up. He looked surprised but happy to see Richie and he was interested, so Richie didn't think twice before stepping into the car with him.

"You disappeared for a while, I looked for you at your usual spot." Mike drove stick and Richie remembered finding that extremely sexy the first night they met.

"I, uh-" *I fell in love.* "Some stuff happened, I had to take a few days."

Mike nodded. He was a quiet man, sweet. His wedding ring was still

shining on his finger. Richie felt relieved it was Mike who showed up that night. He was one of the nicer ones. The motel wasn't too far away. Mike parked the car and checked with Richie if he was okay to go through with this. Richie smiled and stepped out of the car, waiting for Mike to join him.

It was the same room they had stayed at the first time. Richie knew Mike was one of the few who was okay with Richie staying the night with him and that helped him relax a little bit.

Unlike what happened with Eddie, there was no awkwardness with any of Richie's clients, whether it was their first encounter or not. Richie wondered for a few seconds if that meant something.

"Are you looking for the same treatment as before?" Richie took off his jacket, throwing it on the bed. He rested his hands on his sides, exacerbating his waist.

Mike smiled and offered him a drink. Richie thought about strawberries and champagne.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Mike frowned.

Richie pulled him in and kissed his lips. It was a nice kiss, Mike had thick and wet lips, and his body felt warm against Richie's. Something felt off, so Richie wrapped his arms around Mike's shoulders, taking advantage of his height, and deepened the kiss. Mike was pulling him closer too, arms wrapped around Richie's middle.

They fell on the bed, still kissing, and Richie didn't notice his hands sliding under Mike's tight black t-shirt, but he was touching his abs, and his sides, and dragging his fingers slowly up his back, and back down with the scratch of his fingernails.

Mike smiled against his lips and Richie felt a knot forming in his stomach. Mike tasted of cheap Bourbon and cigarettes, a combination that should be intoxicating for Richie, had he not been missing the smell of Eddie's cologne and the taste of mint in his tongue, from their first kiss.

Mike unbuttoned Richie's ripped light blue jeans and unzipped them, palming over his underwear. Then, his body was overriding his brain, and he squirmed away from underneath Mike, with a scared look in his eyes. He was panting and Mike was justifiably worried.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No." He shook his head, eyes fixated in an invisible spot ahead of him. "No." He repeated, softer.

Mike moved closer to him and traced his jaw, the same way Eddie used to. But Mike wasn't Eddie, and Richie wanted to throw up from how ridiculous he was being, how stupid this all was. Then, Mike looked into his eyes and just like that, he gave Richie the answer he was looking for - it was Eddie. He wanted Eddie.

"I'm sorry." Richie blurted out.

"It's- it's okay." Mike reassured him, still a little short of breath. "I thought you didn't kiss…"

"I don't. Or I didn't." He fell back on the bed and rubbed his face. "I'm sorry."

Mike sat next to him and rubbed circles on his forehead with his thumb. "Richie, again, we don't have to do this." He inhaled. "You look..."

"What?" He looked up at Mike, hoping he had answers. He had the kind of eyes that said he had answers.

"Sad. Different. I don't know."

Richie sighed. Mike joined him by laying down in the same position.

"We can just hang out. You know? I don't feel like driving back anyway, to be honest."

"I can't do that, man. I can't pay you for half of the room expenses."

"I don't care about that. You look like you could use a friend, right now."

Richie *could* use a friend actually, thank you very much.

--

So, Richie was working at the Beverly. He started a few weeks after his friendly sleepover with Mike, who had become a good friend. Miss Marsh had gone shopping for a specific kind of fabric one day, when she stopped at a café to get a roll and ran into Richie, working the counter.

Richie didn't pretend Eddie had nothing to do with his decision to change careers. He had everything to do with it, just not in the way most people thought. People assumed Richie had been too in love to be able to continue his job as a sex worker; that hadn't been the case, or at least, that hadn't been the only reason.

The truth was Eddie had shown Richie what he could be, and now Richie wanted more, for himself, for his life. He was determined to become the man Eddie believed he was. Not because he believed he could get him back that way, but because he knew it's what Eddie would have wanted for him.

Beverly knew he still loved him, although Richie wasn't sure what gave it away. Could it have been him asking for the week off the second she told him Eddie would be staying at the hotel in a few days? Perhaps.

It had been nearly four months. He missed him, God, he missed him. He bought the vinyl record of the one Opera they saw together – *Tosca* – and he played it religiously. He still had pancakes for dinner. It was still his name he moaned in the solitude of his bed.

Beverly hadn't given him the week off and Richie knew it was on purpose. Revenge for not letting her tell Eddie he was working there.

"What is he coming to LA for?"

"Work, probably. What else?" She looked sad as she said it.

"Doesn't it bother you? That he never comes to see you?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "I don't go to New York to see him either, so..."

"You should bop him in the head."

She laughed. "Don't you have tables to set, Tozier?"

"Yes, ma'am." He turned on his heels and walked off.

The dining salon was large, taking over almost the entire ground floor. Richie could not look at the piano without blushing and he had to set the tables for breakfast, brunch, lunch and dinner, so...lucky him. At least he finally knew all the silverware.

He went home at the end of that day more tired than normal, something to do with feelings he couldn't quite control. He lay in bed that night with the covers pulled up to his nose. Richie couldn't remember what Eddie smelled like anymore and he hated himself for forgetting. How could he have forgotten? How dare he forget a single thing about that man?

Eddie would be checking in in two days and Richie wished he could slow down time. Nothing could prepare him for this.

--

Doing the same thing twice and expecting a different result is said to be the definition of insanity. Well, mark Eddie down as crazy and stupid, because he was speeding down Hollywood Boulevard. He knew exactly what he was looking for, or *who*, but he wasn't there. Richie wasn't there and Eddie wanted to bang his head on the steering wheel to the point of unconsciousness.

What was the endgame anyway? What would he do if he did find Richie? Did he truly expect him to step into a car with him again? Stay with him for a few more days? Richie had made very clear

during their last conversation that he didn't want that.

Maybe Eddie just wanted to see him so he could make sure he was okay. Richie lived a risky lifestyle, that was his reality. Eddie just needed to know he was safe. He didn't need to kiss him, or hold him, or sleep with him. He wanted to, but he didn't need it.

He drove back to the Beverly and handed the keys to the valet as the clock struck eleven. He turned a quick gaze at the bus stop and the bench that stood beside it. He could almost see Richie sitting on the backrest, his denim shorts folding slightly on his thighs. He had wanted him so badly that night, like he had never wanted anybody before.

Richie knew damn well what he did to men, there was no way he didn't. His self-esteem issues ran much deeper than looks, touching upon his sense of worth. He knew he was attractive, he just thought that was all he was. A pretty face for men to fuck. That had been what Eddie saw that first night, too. He had never been more wrong in his life. Richie was everything.

Eddie smiled to himself as he climbed the steps to the front entrance of the Beverly Hotel.

Eddie turned the left corner towards the elevators, gave the bellhop a nod, and stepped inside. Richie stepped out of the salon as the elevator closed, missing it for a few seconds. It was okay, he could get the next one, so he stood there, checked the time and took a deep breath. The exhale, however, was put on hold when he went pale – the smell of Eddie's cologne and body wash, that scent he had somehow forgotten, hung in the air.

The next morning, Richie felt like he had been hit by a car. It couldn't have been Eddie standing in that elevator as it closed right before his eyes could it? Had Richie missed him for two seconds? He could feel himself go insane.

He checked into work at 2pm, just after lunch. He preferred the afternoon shift, because it meant he could avoid the morning check-in and check-out rush. Rich people were rude when they were in a hurry. Richie always felt an urge to yell at them to get out of bed early next time, if they didn't wanna miss their flights. Thank God they didn't have him working reception, although Beverly did say he could very well get promoted to it if he kept up the good work.

Richie slid to the back, passed the elevators and closed the door to the staff's break room. Two minutes later, Eddie was stepping out of the salon with Maddy; two minutes after that, Richie was walking in, ready to help lift the lunch tables.

They did this for two days, unknowingly watched by Beverly. She could almost find it funny, if it weren't so painfully sad. She couldn't betray Richie's trust and tell Eddie he was there, but wasn't she breaking Eddie's trust in the first place, by not telling him the man he loved was only a few feet away?

--

Beverly ran into the salon and almost body slammed into Richie.

"What the fuck, Red?" Luckily, they were alone.

"Eddie."

"What about Eddie?"

"He's having dinner here, tonight."

"Here?" He pointed to the floor.

"Here. In the salon. Where you work."

Richie's lip twitched. "I'm okay, Bev." That was a fucking lie if he'd ever told one. "Really."

Bev put a soothing hand on his upper arm and smiled. "I think it'll be good for you to see each other."

"Right." Richie turned around with a weak smile and went back to work.

--

Eddie was still struggling with his newfound hate for the penthouse. It looked the exact same, no surprise there. Eddie was a creature of habit, but he questioned the integrity of his brain for letting him choose to stay in the exact same place where he had fallen in love with Richie.

The first night, he kept expecting to see Richie laying on the floor in front of the TV, munching on strawberries with his legs crossed at the ankles. By the second night, he could have sworn he had heard him singing in the shower. It was a freak thing; Eddie was acting like he had died, and he was being haunted by memories.

Well, Richie may not have died, but he was definitely gone.

Eddie walked to the bathroom where his shaving kit had been laid out earlier. In one hour, he would be having dinner downstairs with Stan and then they were meant to come back to his room, to go over some clauses on the new contracts.

He poured shaving foam on the tips of his fingers and began spreading it around his cheeks, chin, jawline and neck. He picked up the razor and started working it on his skin, careful not to nick himself. His mind got away from him almost immediately, and lately he would allow this to happen. He wondered if Richie still had a stubble, if he had let it grow, or if he was clean shaven.

He wondered about Richie a lot – who he was with, if he still lived

with Bill, if he was being treated properly, if any clients had been a little heavier handed with him lately. He hoped the week he had wasted with Eddie hadn't hurt him too much, considering he hadn't gotten paid for it. He should have been more insistent of Richie taking the money. He shouldn't have let him go at all.

It had only been four months since the last time he saw Richie, but it felt like a lifetime. Eddie's life had changed so much, it was fair to assume Richie's had too.

He finished his first pass with the razor and set it down, picking up the shaving cream again. Eddie sighed. He didn't have to focus for the act of shaving, he had done it so many times before.

He looked at the bathtub from the corner of his eyes and smiled subconsciously, unaware he was doing it until he caught himself in the mirror. He cleared his throat and forced his mouth to stop whatever it was doing.

Once he was finally done with shaving, he stepped into the shower. Eddie was really beginning to get angry at his past self for having sex with Richie in every corner of the fucking place; that is, until he rested his forehead on the tiles and closed his fist around his dick.

He was immediately hard, just from the memory of Richie's teeth sinking into his shoulder while Eddie jerked him off. So what if Eddie touched himself and imagined it was Richie he was getting off? It's a free country.

Eddie panted as he worked his hand up and down his shaft. He leaned his forearm on the shower wall and hid his face in the crook of his elbow. "Hh-" His breath caught in his throat. This wasn't going to take very long; he hadn't cum in a few days.

He missed the noises Richie made, his hot breath in his ear, the way he would cry out Eddie's name over and over again. Eddie felt on top of the world when he was tearing Richie apart with only his hands.

Eddie squeezed his eyes shut and tightened the grip around his cock, breathing heavy. A moan escaped the back of his throat when he sped up, building up his orgasm. He was close when he moaned

Richie's name, letting it drip hot and wet between his lips. He came apart and didn't open his eyes in time to see the water wash away his load.

He rubbed his forehead on his forearm and stood up straight, reaching for the shampoo bottle.

Eddie didn't wear ties anymore, except for more professional occasions. He didn't remember the last time he had put one on for a business dinner, or before a workday at the office. Yet another long-lasting effect of one week with Richie Tozier.

He took a look at his wristwatch, still laid out on the bed. 6:15. *Perfect.* He would go down a little earlier and see if he could find Bev.

It would have been easy to get on the elevator and go up to the penthouse. He could just knock on the door and talk to him. He missed him so much, it wasn't fair. They barely had any time to- to- Richie didn't know what, but he knew it wasn't fair. He knew there was more he needed to say. He just wanted to love him a little longer.

Richie wasn't the type to face his problems head-on. Not that Eddie was a problem, but he was definitely the root of whatever he was feeling. He felt dizzy.

Richie was twirling a crystal champagne cup in his hand, polishing it. He hadn't moved in five minutes.

"Are you trying to polish that into oblivion, man?" His colleague called out.

Richie looked up. "Hm?" He looked at the cup in his hand. "Oh. Sorry, I got distracted."

"You've been acting so weird this week. You good?"

"Yeah. Yeahyeahyeah. All good." He leaned against the cabinet. "What time is it?"

"6:30. We have time, service isn't until 7."

Richie began tapping his foot. "I gotta go to the bathroom." He ran off.

Eddie saw him. It was him, it had to be. Either that, or he really was losing it. Richie had just crossed the hallway, making a beeline between the salon and the men's restroom. Eddie wasn't crazy, he could recognise him from miles away. He was in love with him, he would have recognized him anywhere. But *how?* How could he be there?

"Mr. Kaspbrak?"

Eddie turned around and tried his best to appear normal.

"Yes?"

"I'm Peter, I'll be your waiter tonight. Your guest, Mr. Uris, has arrived early, he was requesting to go upstairs, but I saw you come down." He was sweating from his temples. "I hope it's not a problem."

Eddie was still trying to collect his thoughts. He felt crazy.

"Mr. Kaspbrak?"

"Sorry, sorry. Yes, it's, uh- it's no problem at all. Could we maybe get service a little earlier?"

"Of course, you can go sit down at any table, I'll send Mr. Uris your way."

Eddie walked away frowning and with an ache in his chest.

Richie gripped the bathroom sink and stared at himself in the mirror. "Come on, get it together." He squeezed his eyes shut. "It's just Eddie. You know him, he knows you. You love him and that's okay. It's okay to love him." He finally believed that. "Just...keep it together, Richie."

It wasn't fair, to be honest. Richie knew Eddie was there, he could prepare himself for their inevitable reunion. Eddie, on the other hand, had no idea. Maybe Richie shouldn't have kept Bev from telling him. He had a right to know. What if Eddie didn't wanna see him ever again? Maybe if he had known Richie was working there, he would have chosen to stay somewhere else. Richie had taken away his right to decide when and how he saw him again. He felt sick thinking about it. This felt violating in some way.

He leaned over the sink and splashed his face with cold water. He stared at himself once more, dried his face, fixed his work clothes and stepped out of the restroom.

"There you are, I was looking for you." Peter walked towards him with a sweaty forehead.

"What's up?" Richie had gotten good at faking normalcy.

"You know that rich guy Kaspbrak? The guy from the penthouse? He requested to get an earlier service, because his guest arrived early. Whatever, it doesn't matter, we gotta go." Peter had reached a level of stress so great it had turned him blind to Richie's very obvious incoming panic attack.

Peter didn't wait for him, simply walking back to the salon. Richie walked the other way.

Peter walked into the salon and went straight towards Eddie's table, where he was already seated and accompanied by Stan. "Gentlemen, how are you?" He greeted, leaving behind the menu before walking off again.

Eddie had too much on his mind to order what he wanted from the listing. He wasn't hungry; in fact, he couldn't think of anything he was less interested in than eating right now.

"Something is bothering you..." Stan put down the list.

"It's nothing, just..."

From a distance, Eddie heard the following:

"Where's Richie?"

"Hm?"

"Tozier. Where is he?"

"He wasn't feeling well. I checked on him and I thought he was following me back here, but-"

Eddie stood up and almost knocked his chair over.

"Eddie?" Stan mouthed concerned.

"It's- I-" Eddie took a deep breath and evened out his expression, straightening his shoulders. "Stan, can we do this tomorrow?"

Stan looked confused as all hell, unsure of what to do with his hands or where to look. Before he could answer, Eddie was walking off.

"You." He pointed, his natural commanding tone showing through again, now that he was confident it really had been Richie back there. He wasn't going crazy. "Peter, right?"

The young man nodded.

"Where's your break room?" Eddie asked.

"It's near the elevators, but Sir- Sir! Guests aren't allowed-"

Eddie was off before he could finish. *Where are you, honey?* "I'm gonna kill him. I'm gonna kiss him and then I'm gonna kill him."

Eddie opened the door to the break room. In hindsight, he probably should have knocked, but it was worth it just to see the look in those kids' faces when he caught them making out in the break room.

"Please don't tell on us."

Eddie laughed beside himself. *My life is a comedy*. "Do you know Richie?"

"Tozier?" The guy asked.

Eddie nodded.

"He grabbed his things and said he was sick and going home." The girl offered.

"Thank you." Eddie said and began closing the door, only to open it again. "Use protection." Then he left, leaving behind the two confused kids.

Eddie reached the reception in record time. He knew he must look absolutely out of his mind, and maybe he was. Maybe love was insanity.

"How much money would I have to pay you for you to give me information on one of your employees?"

The girl at the reception was new at the hotel, she couldn't be more than 23 years old. "Uhh..." She looked past his shoulder. "Miss Marsh?" Eddie detected some panic in her voice and didn't know if he should cackle or sob.

"Edward, what are you doing?" Bev came up behind him.

He tightened his lips, but his anger dissipated quickly. He dropped his shoulders. "How could you not tell me you gave him a job, Bev?"

Beverly looked at the receptionist who was staring curiously at them. She put an arm around Eddie's shoulders and walked him away.

"He-" Eddie started.

"I know." She smiled weakly. "I'm sorry, sweetheart." She inhaled sharply. "I promised him I wouldn't tell you; he didn't want you to think he was doing it for you."

"I don't think that."

"It's hard to know what you think, Eddie."

And yet, Richie always did. Eddie ran his fingers through his hair. "I

don't even know what- God, he probably doesn't even-"

"He does." She reached for her pocket and took out a folded piece of paper. She handed it to him.

He unfolded it and as he read its contents, she added "It's his address."

Eddie kissed her cheek and went upstairs to get his coat.

--

It couldn't have gone worse if Richie tried. So much for trying to make a better life for himself. What was all of this for if he was just going to hide from Eddie for the next however many years? He didn't see himself falling out of love with him anytime soon.

He hadn't even seen him, and he felt like someone had reached inside his chest and poked his heart with their fingers until he was dead. How would he survive facing him? Looking into his big brown eyes again? His knees still buckled at the mere thought of his kiss.

Richie couldn't do this. He would call in sick the next day and that would be it. Bev would understand, she had to.

He walked the streets of LA searching for his next move. Going home felt like a terrible idea. He could use a drink, but he was depressed enough as it was, so alcohol was probably a bad idea. If he stopped for a few seconds and closed his eyes he could feel every inch of his skin call for Eddie, begging Richie to find him, kiss him, tell him everything; preferably in that order.

Richie began singing to himself instead, muffling the sound of his own heart.

Eddie had managed to sneak behind who he assumed to be one of

Richie's neighbours as they walked into the building. Now, he was standing in front of Richie's apartment door, feeling like a creep.

He took a few deep breaths and rang the doorbell, but no one came. He tried again. Nothing. Either Richie hadn't gone straight home, or he knew somehow it was Eddie at the door and wasn't opening by choice. He tried knocking, before turning around and walking down the stairs.

He was tired and he was cold. His limbs felt heavy, along with his heart. He could wait or he could go back to the hotel, but at this point he felt like no matter what he did it wouldn't make a difference. They kept missing each other, maybe the universe was trying to tell him something. *Fuck the universe!* His brain offered. Eddie smiled to himself. "Fuck the universe."

Eddie reached the bottom of the stairs as Richie opened the door to his building. Eddie swore time stopped.

"Eddie." He let go of the door and they both stood there as it slammed shut.

Eddie smiled so wide it hurt. He didn't know what this new feeling was, but if he had to guess he would say it was pure unadulterated relief, mixed with whatever one feels seeing the love of their life for the first time in four months. Eddie was new to this.

Richie smiled back and something caught in his throat. He opened his mouth to speak but it was too late to say anything.

Eddie ran to him, arms wrapping around Richie's neck. He kissed him. He kissed him like he hadn't kissed anyone in years. He kissed him like it was the first and last time, like he hadn't taken a single breath since the second they parted. In a way he hadn't, Eddie knew that now. *I love you. Take this, take me. Take all of me. Please, hold on to every inch, hold on.*

He was giving Richie everything he had, he was right there and, God, he was scared, he was so scared of what could possibly come next.

Richie pulled away and looked into his eyes, as if asking if this was

real. Eddie's expression was soft. He ran his thumb down Richie's face, who closed his eyes at the gentle touch.

"Eds-"

"I shouldn't have let you go."

Richie's eyes widened, then softened. "I should have stayed." He leaned his forehead against Eddie's.

Eddie kissed his eyelids and forehead. He brushed Richie's hair to the side and appreciated how much longer it had gotten.

"Eddie, I have to tell you. I have to, because I need you to know what you're getting yourself into, and this might have you running away, but I-"

"I think I know." He brushed their noses together. "Tell me."

Richie exhaled with a strained noise. "I love you- I'm in love with you."

Eddie reeled him in with a hand on the back of his neck and playing with the longer strands of hair there. Their lips met again, more frantic than before, hungrier. The first kiss said, "I miss you." This one screamed, "I love you, too.", so Eddie told him as much.

"I love you." He spoke against Richie's lips, their voices mixing together.

He wrapped his arms around Richie's neck and pulled him in close, afraid he was going to dissolve into thin air. Richie's mouth tasted sweet and Eddie would never get tired of doing this, he decided. He was never going to let him go again. He would move to LA for him. He would walk across the country to see him if he had to. Richie would never be alone again, and Eddie would never wonder about him again, because Richie would be right there.

Their mouths parted with a wet noise and Richie looked up, towards the staircase. Eddie looked in the same direction. They exchanged looks and ran up the stairs.

--

Eddie lay on his stomach with closed eyes, as Richie drew circles on his back with his fingers. His chin was propped up on the dip between Eddie's shoulder blades and he kept giving him little kisses.

"I missed you." Eddie whispered into the silence.

Richie got off of him and lay on his back, so Eddie would cover his chest with his arms, in a half embrace. Richie reached up to touch Eddie's face, holding his cheek in his palm. Eddie leaned into his touch and kissed Richie's wrist. "I missed you, too."

"I'm sorry."

Richie frowned. "Why?" He looked sad; Eddie wanted to *eat him*.

"For taking so long. For letting you leave."

"I'm sorry for leaving."

"Why didn't you stay that last night?" His eyebrows became one line.

"I didn't think I deserved to. I didn't think I deserved to feel happy."

Eddie kissed Richie's chest, just over his heart. "If I can make you happy, that's all I will ever need."

"I'm gonna keep you if you don't mind, Mr. Kaspbrak." Richie wrapped his entire body around Eddie's.

"Throw away the key." Eddie pressed his lips to Richie's one more time.

They had time now. Eddie didn't fall asleep that night thinking about how many more nights they still had or whether or not Richie would still let him kiss him in the morning. They had time. Fuck the

universe.

THE END

Notes for the Chapter:

And just like that, we have reached the ending.
Thank you so much for reading it and sticking around for the whole thing!
Leave a comment and spare some kudos if you want to let me know you enjoyed it!

All the love.
Tex.

You can find me on twitter HERE